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Rachel Carrington

Walking
Through Fire

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By

Rachel Carrington



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Prologue

"You mean I can't die?" Caleb stared at his father, his hand over the seeping wound inches above his heart.

The elder Montgomery shook his head slowly. "No, you can't."

"That's crazy," Caleb snapped back.

"Is it? Then remove your hand and watch."

In slow motion, with a horrified expression on his face, Caleb lowered his hand and in a matter of seconds, the seven-inch gash began to heal, the edges of his skin coming together as if on command. Nausea crowded Caleb's stomach and he lurched forward toward the bed.

"Son, I'm sorry. Your mother and I wanted to tell you earlier, but we just didn't know how. We never even considered something like this."

"You mean a fight? I'm seventeen years old, Dad!" Caleb shouted. "How many teenagers do you know who don't fight?"

Dylan Montgomery lowered his head. "I'm sorry. We just didn't..."

Caleb held up one hand and flopped back against the mattress. Overhead, the planet mobile moved in synchronization. "I know. You didn't know how to tell me. I just wish you'd figured it out."

Caleb shook off the disturbing memories of his youth and rolled out of bed, pushing his hair away from his face. He took another swig of whiskey from the half-empty bottle on the nightstand and swiped a hand over his stubble-ridden jaw.

As he stood beneath the shower spray, his father's words came back to him.

"You can't escape your destiny, my son."

"Then tell me what that is."

"I cannot."

"I need to know why I can't die."

"Only you can discover this information."

Caleb shut off the hot water and reached for the towel hanging across from the toilet. He'd spent the better part of yesterday in the bottle and now, the aftereffects caused tiny tin soldiers to drum against his brain in unison.

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If only he could rewind the clock somehow and erase all the memories of the past, take away the pain of death and loss. His loss. Only his. His entire family had long since passed on along with his wife and children. He'd buried each of them and now, it was time to find out why.

If his father's handwritten notes were anything to go by, Caleb would find his answers in Romania.

Caleb walked out of the bathroom with the towel knotted around his waist and tugged open the top drawer of his bureau. The first class ticket lay nestled atop his boxer shorts.

He'd leave today and he wouldn't come back until he knew why illness, injury, or even whiskey couldn't end his life.

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Chapter One

Rianna knew trouble when she smelled it and right now, trouble followed her down the long, narrow corridor deep into the heart of the Spirit Council's chambers. With each step of her feet against the concrete, a bell chimed. She knew the grouchy ghosts just did that for effect.

Grumbling to herself, she passed the Lake of Mourning and looked away. She didn't want to see the families below grieving the addition of a new ghost in the realm. Just as her family had once mourned her.

The Silent Suite lay just ahead and Rianna quickened her pace. Many spirits spent hours of their day behind the beveled glass door in an effort to soothe their souls. Rianna didn't want to be soothed. Soothing bored her. She needed excitement. Hence, the trouble she now faced.

The arched doorway at the end of hallway beckoned her and as the double brass doors swung open, Rianna heard the murmur of voices. She didn't have to look at the audience as she passed by. She knew every one of them by name. After all, she'd been dead for five years now and as luck would have it, she spent a lot of time standing in front of the Spirit's Council, much to her grandfather's consternation.

"Rianna." The deep, booming voice belonged to Ezra, leader of the Spirit Council, and in Rianna's opinion, the crankiest of the ghosts. She'd heard a rumor that Ezra hadn't been any more pleasant as a mere mortal.

She came forward reluctantly, standing with her hands behind her back and her head tilted at a jaunty angle. She knew they expected subservience and regret. She gave them neither. "You asked to see me."

Ezra's thin lips narrowed to mere slashes. "It has come to our attention," he swept a bony hand wide to include the remaining members of the committee, "that you have been appearing in front of humans again."

Rianna sighed and wondered who'd squealed this time. She edged a look over her shoulder and caught Jasmine's smirk. The do-gooder ghost carried a grudge against Rianna for some unknown reason. Rianna had never cared enough to figure out why.

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“The humans don’t know I’m a ghost, Ezra. So if I simply walk among them, what harm is there?”

Ezra’s face purpled. “What harm you ask? It is forbidden!”

The other council members nodded and murmured their assent.

Rianna sighed. Someone coughed behind her, but she didn’t look back. She recognized the sound. Her grandfather moved to stand in position beside her.

“Ezra, may I address the council, please?”

“Are you seeking to make allowances for your granddaughter yet again?”

Rianna tapped her grandfather’s arm. “No, he isn’t. I can speak for myself and I don’t need to make allowances.”

“You need to follow the rules,” Ezra replied.

“The rules are ridiculous. What good is being dead if you still have to follow rules?” Mingled gasps echoed across the room and Rianna rolled her eyes.

Punishment came swiftly. “You will not make your presence known to the humans again or you will be banished to the Netherworld to consider your actions.”

A hush fell over the chamber.

Rianna didn’t know much about the Netherworld other than the little she’d gleaned from the female ghosts while they whiled away their hours trading gossip. She only knew it was a place she didn’t care to visit.

Time to fall back on the acting classes she’d taken before her life had been cut short. “Yes, Ezra. My apologies. I will make every effort to follow the rules.”

Some of the color receded from Ezra’s face. It didn’t improve his appearance. “You will keep yourself well hidden, Rianna.”

“I don’t have to hide!” She shot back. “No one can see me!”

Grandfather placed a hand on her arm. “Rianna, please.”

She clenched her jaw shut and chafed under yet another restriction. She’d always been a free spirit when alive and it had been a definite bite in the shorts to discover she wouldn’t be as free in the afterlife.

She hated conformity but she smiled anyway. “I’m sorry for my outburst. As I said, I will make every effort to follow the rules.” *Of course, I can’t be blamed if my efforts fail at times.*

“Rianna.” Her grandfather accurately read her thoughts. A wise Shaman in his human life, he still carried much of his abilities with him.

Rianna gave him an impish grin and lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug. “May I be dismissed now, Ezra?”

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The trio of ghosts on the panel carried on a brief discussion in low, heated voices before Ezra finally lifted his head. “Yes, you may, Rianna, but take note that we will not be so lenient should a future transgression occur.”

Rianna backed out of the room with a lowered head, giving Ezra a slice of the obedience he craved from her. The second the brass doors snapped shut, she turned and fled down the corridor, seeking escape.

And Rianna’s escape route of choice was the mortal world.

“Rianna.”

Force of habit brought her to a complete stop and as Rianna turned to face her grandfather, she saw his displeasure. She held up one hand, but knew it was a useless attempt to stop him. “Gramps, I don’t want to have this conversation.”

Oscar Bonovich ignored her. “You must stop this constant obsession with bending the rules. You must conform.”

Rianna stared at him, wondering if her ears deceived her. “You lived your entire life outside the rigid rules of conformity and now, you’re telling me to give in?”

He gripped her arm and steered her into a dark corner. He kept his voice low, but the intensity captured Rianna’s attention. “Sometimes, conformity is a necessity.”

She looked down at his hand and back up at his insistent face before she replied. “I don’t belong here, Gramps.”

“You’re a ghost. Where else do you belong?”

Rianna pointed at the ground. “Down there.”

Her grandfather scowled at her. “Down there will only bring trouble. You had your chance to live a full life and because of your inability to obey simple commands, you lost your life. Now, you must accept the consequences of your hasty decisions.”

Rianna tipped her head to one side, certain her grandfather was attempting to pass along a subliminal message. She leaned in closer to his lined face and whispered, “Did Ezra ask you to talk to me?”

Oscar stared at her blankly and Rianna had her answer. She gritted her teeth.

“Pompous ass doesn’t even have the decency to come talk to me himself, one on one.” She clamped her hands on her hips. “Did he threaten you?”

Oscar smiled a little. “What can he possibly take from me, my sweet, that I have not already lost?”

He had a point. Rianna patted his hand for comfort, maybe more for her own. “Well, don’t worry. I won’t let him do anything to you. If I must, I will swallow my pride.”

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Oscar's face relaxed. "That is good to hear."

Rianna began to dissipate. "But first, I need one more look around."

"Rianna!"

Caleb didn't belong in Romania, but instincts guided him to the beautiful country where the grass grew as green as emeralds and the mountains stretched all the way to the sky. He inhaled the fresh air and slipped his jacket from his shoulders. Though the wind carried a bite, the noon-day sun beating down on his back and shoulders made him uncomfortably warm.

He shouldered his back pack and withdrew the map from the front pocket of his bomber jacket. Ten paces ahead and then to the right. *Paces? Who still measured distances in paces?* Apparently, the wizened old man who sold Caleb the map.

Caleb grinned and tucked the hand-written notes safely back into his pocket. Time for a break. A well-deserved one at that. He headed for a copse of trees where mossy grass covered a large rock and he dropped his pack and canteen.

A small waterfall flowed into a gurgling stream and the water looked fresh and inviting. His skin craved the touch of the coolness and in a matter of seconds, Caleb stripped out of his clothes and waded out. With a sigh of pure pleasure, he fell back against the liquid mattress and closed his eyes.

He didn't know how long he floated across the glistening water, listening to the soothing sounds of the waterfall and the chatter of birds. He rarely got the opportunity to just enjoy nature and though he had a mission to complete, he was in no hurry.

He closed his eyes and fell into an almost trance-like state . . .for the space of two seconds. Then he heard the laughter. Soft and musical, it called to him. His eyes sprang open and he turned so abruptly, he sank into the water. The light laughter became louder and Caleb, coughing and sputtering, righted himself and shoved his hair out of his eyes.

She stood on the bank of the stream, stunning, mesmerizing. Her long hair, the color of ripe chestnuts, flowed to her waist in waves. She wore a white dress, which looked as soft as cotton and when she moved, it clung to her curves, outlining the lush ripeness of her body.

Caleb regretted that he couldn't see her eyes from the distance. "Hello," he called out to her as he paddled slowly toward the edge of the stream.

"Hello." Her voice washed over him, as gentle as the touch of a baby's hand.

She defined beauty and as Caleb drew closer, until the sun's rays showcased her warm chocolate eyes. He wanted to touch her and wondered if she would disappear the moment his hand glossed over the perfect skin.

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He came out of the water slowly. "Do I know you?"

She took a step backwards and a smile tipped up the corners of her mouth. "I don't believe so, no."

"I'm Caleb," he introduced himself with the hopes that she would do the same.

"You are a long way from home, Caleb." Her words admonished him.

His eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

She tapped one finger against her chin. "I can recognize travelers." She backed up again and she appeared to float, her feet barely touching the ground. Caleb shook his head to clear his vision and the woman's form began to waver.

He closed his eyes and gave his head an even firmer shake.

"Goodbye, Caleb."

His eyes popped open and disappointment enshrouded him.

She'd left.

Gramps paced back and forth, pausing occasionally to ruffle his shock of white hair. Now standing on end, the strands gave him a wild appearance. "Rianna, you cannot keep doing this. You have no idea what danger you're putting yourself in."

Rianna floated toward the far wall of the corridor and materialized in full form to face her grandfather's wrath. "Gramps, I died so young."

"I'm aware of your age, but you've had six years to get used to your new life."

"This isn't a life! It's a sentence!"

Gramps' jaw clenched and his pacing intensified. He began to mutter beneath his breath and Rianna knew she wouldn't escape without a long, drawn out lecture where her grandfather would detail the intricacies of existence in the afterlife.

Oscar Bonovich had spent the last sixteen years gaining experience. Rianna didn't want any more experience. She wanted freedom. She wanted to live again.

"Have I ever told you about young Gabriel Benning?"

Only a thousand times, Rianna thought with an inaudible groan. She wished she could find a sexy senior ghost to push in her grandfather's direction, but so far, from what she'd seen, ghosts didn't engage in the pleasures of the mortal flesh. Rianna's nose wrinkled. She'd had enough celibacy to last her a lifetime.

"Rianna, are you listening to me?"

"Of course, Gramps. Young Gabriel Benning came to the afterlife with a chip on his shoulder and the determination to escape his new existence." Rianna drew in a deep breath and released the remainder of her diction on a rush of air. "And he ended up being

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banished to Oblivion and no one has seen or heard from him since.” She grinned wickedly. “I guess that’s why it’s called Oblivion.”

Gramps let out a snarled mixture of Romanian curse words and English recriminations. “Do not think you can amuse yourself at the expense of the Council. They hold the power here.”

“I know, I know. More rules. You would think we’d at least manage to escape the damned things in death.”

Gramps’ fingers made another scrape through his hair. “You try my patience, my sweet.”

She rushed forward, feeling an instant surge of sympathy and love for the spry old man who’d spent his life curing the ails of humans in pain. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him with all her might. No matter how irreverent she might be with the Council, she loved her grandfather and she didn’t intentionally want to hurt him. She just couldn’t make him understand her need for more.

Gramps patted her back. “There’s my girl. Now, let’s try to have a peaceful afterlife, shall we?”

Rianna pulled back enough to see his face. “I was under the impression that death guaranteed peace.”

“Only to those who deserve it.”

She laughed and kissed his cheek. “Well, if anyone deserves it, you do. Of course, you never expected to spend eternity with me.”

His face clouded. “I had hoped not to spend it with either of my granddaughters.”

At the mention of her sister, Rianna felt a surge of grief. She missed her sibling desperately and though she knew Mischa had found love, Rianna couldn’t help but wonder if she’d found happiness.

Gramps captured Rianna’s face in his hands. “Of course Mischa is happy. She has her husband and new life. You should be happy for her.”

Rianna managed a wobbly smile. “I am, Gramps. Now,” she hooked her hand through his arm to distract him, “what shall we do this evening?” As she guided her grandfather down the corridor, the world below called to her, much like a siren to an unsuspecting male.

And her thoughts drifted to one unsuspecting male in particular. Caleb. The moment she touched him with her eyes, she felt something stir within her phantom soul. How could she not? The man personified sex. Tall, lean, with broad shoulders and salt and pepper hair, he oozed masculinity from every pore and those eyes, when he’d gotten close enough for her to see them, she’d noticed those blue irises with hints of gold.

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But deep below the surface of the outstanding looks, Caleb carried a wealth of pain. She'd seen it. She'd felt it and for a brief moment, she'd had to resist the urge to take him in her arms and offer comfort. But she knew the risks of such an endeavor. To touch a mortal in her corporeal form, she would open herself up to the wrath of the Council and further endanger what little freedom she had. No, she wouldn't take such a risk, at least not yet.

But there were other ways...

Caleb fell into a heavy sleep, the combined effects of a daylong hike and an early morning the day before. As the night drew on, his muscles unfurled and warmth fell over him like a blanket.

He turned in his sleep and encountered unresisting, soft flesh. He tried to open his eyes, but the lids refused to budge.

"*Shhh,*" came the whispered instruction. A feminine hand curled around his cock and it responded with a jerk. Caleb groaned aloud.

"What are you doing?"

She began to stroke the taut flesh and the sensations knotted his stomach muscles. Caleb couldn't lift his arms to stop her though stopping her wasn't really his intention. He wanted to feel the curves yielding against his body.

"Do you like this, Caleb?"

"Do I know you? How do you know my name?"

The seductress nibbled at his lower lip and Caleb moaned low in his throat. His body throbbed while fire raged low.

"Do you want me to stop?" The question sounded more like a taunt. She kissed her way down his body, pausing to lick around his navel and through the narrow patch of hair leading to his stiff cock.

Caleb's breathing increased and he managed to clench his hands at his sides. *"I want to touch you."*

"Not yet, my darling. For now, I want to enjoy you." Her lips encased the head of his dick and Caleb cried out.

The dream took on a life of its own as the vixen tantalized him with teeth and tongue. She caressed his balls, the underside of his cock and the insides of his thighs. She bathed the lower half of his body with her slick lips and Caleb began to pant.

"Do you want me, Caleb?"

"Yes!" The answer exploded from his lungs.

"Then you shall have me."

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Her reply brought relief but no more so than the continued foreplay of her clever tongue against his cock. She gripped the backs of his thighs and took him deep within her throat.

Caleb felt his world begin to spin and as the sweat dripped off his body, he couldn't catch his breath. He couldn't think. Couldn't speak. Couldn't move.

The orgasm stole everything and as his fluid filled the warm, wet cavern of his dream lover's mouth, she drank greedily, milking him until he twisted and thrashed beneath her.

"Your name. Please tell me your name," he begged.

"You should sleep now, Caleb. It's getting late. You need your rest."

Sweet oblivion washed over him and he sank into a dreamless sleep.

Rianna stood by the edge of the stream where she'd first seen Caleb's marvelous body. She'd wanted him then and though she risked the wrath of the Council, she'd taken what she wanted tonight.

She sat down with her feet dangling in the water and listened to the chirp of crickets and the sounds of the night. She loved this peaceful time when the world went to bed. The darkness allowed her the freedom to roam in her corporeal form, another mark against her if the Council learned of her deliberate disobedience.

She'd expected death to be something different than this ethereal plane of existence. She'd wanted more. Peace, perhaps, but then, peace didn't necessarily bring happiness.

She rested her hands behind her and looked out over the water. Fish jumped against the glassy surface in search of food and the gentle splashes made her smile. She wanted a new life, a second chance, and something told her Caleb might be able to help her. She didn't know why her instincts gave her that impression, but tonight, when she'd taken him into her mouth and tasted his essence, she'd sensed a different type of man. Maybe he didn't even know it himself.

A twig snapped behind her and Rianna scrambled to her feet. She whirled in time to see her grandfather approaching with a stern look on his face. "Hi, Gramps."

He wagged a finger. "Don't you hi me. The Council has been asking about you."

"Damn."

"Don't worry. I covered for you."

Rianna gave her grandfather a bright smile. "Thanks. I knew I could count on you." She bounced forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I know you worry

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about me, Gramps, but,” she sighed and released him. “I just don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Gramps took her face in his hands and smiled into her eyes. “You like excitement, adventure and freedom. You have none of that here.”

She lowered her gaze. “This seems a bit like hell to me.”

Gramps chuckled. “Hell is merely a state of mind, my sweetness. Now, we shall return at once. I don’t know how much longer the Council will buy my story about your walk around the realm.”

Rianna tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I always know where to find you, Rianna. Sometimes, I just don’t come looking for you.”

“I want to leave, Gramps.”

He began walking, towing her along with him. “Leaving isn’t an option.”

She stopped and turned, tugging her grandfather around to face her. “Then you have to help me make it an option.”

He shook his head almost sadly. “I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. You were the most powerful shaman on this Earth when you were alive. You could destroy continents if you wanted.”

Gramps chuckled and brushed his knuckles down her cheeks. “Ah, the innocence of youth. Rianna, when I departed life, I left behind my old ways. I do not have the powers, which I used when I was alive. Now, I am like you, a ghostly being with a mind and a spirit.”

Rianna’s face fell. “But you could still help me...if you wanted to.”

Gramps hesitated. “What is it you are asking from me?”

Rianna closed her eyes for a moment then shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind, Gramps. I wouldn’t want to risk getting you involved in my situations.” She sent him a brave smile and began walking again. “But thanks again for covering for me with the Council.”

“A bunch of boring asses, they are.”

Rianna laughed. She couldn’t agree more.

The sun startled him awake and Caleb came to a sitting position instantly, his heart thundering in his chest and perspiration coating his skin. He glanced down at the lower half of his body and saw his jeans still zipped and fastened.

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A dream. A fucking dream. It had seemed so real. He still felt her hands on his body, the warm wetness of her tongue as it slid over his cock. His body reacted to his words with a violent surge and Caleb cursed aloud.

He leapt to his feet and shook one leg to make more room in the crotch of his jeans. He wondered if the forest was cursed. His family had warned him about the dangers deep in the mountains of Romania, but he wouldn't listen. He had to find the answers he needed.

He had to find out why he was about to celebrate his 210th birthday.

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Chapter Two

Rianna hummed below her breath as she searched through the dusty tomes inside the ancient library. Ordinarily, she didn't spend a lot of time reading, but she knew of no other way to glean the information she sought.

She turned the yellowed linen page on the black arts manual and pored over the words, her eyes widening with each line she read.

"Hello, Rianna. I didn't expect to find you here."

The words startled her and Rianna quickly slammed the cover of the book shut. "Nelson, you shouldn't go sneaking up on me like that. If I wasn't already dead, you would have scared me to death."

Nelson, a particularly nosy spirit, folded his translucent arms over his chest and frowned down at her. "What is that you're reading?"

She tucked the book behind her back. "Nothing. What brings you here?"

Nelson's frown intensified. "I come here every day to read and to absorb the atmosphere."

Rianna wrinkled her nose. "Seems like a boring way to spend your eternity."

He lifted one shoulder in a defensive shrug. "It's better than fighting the system every moment."

She caught the dig and smiled. "I've never been a follower." She tried to scoot past him with the book sandwiched between her arm and her hip.

Nelson sidestepped with her. "You probably shouldn't take the book out of the library, Rianna. The Council wouldn't like it."

The Saints save her from busybody ghosts! She hitched the manual higher up her waist and favored Nelson with a charming smile, one which she usually reserved for mortal men. She watched the spirit blink in surprise and when she took a step closer to him, Nelson stumbled backwards. *Not a very graceful ghost.*

She pressed her lips to her fingertips and blew him a kiss. His eyes bulged and Rianna made her escape before Nelson could figure out her intention.

She rounded the corner just past the library and catching sight of Ezra's gauzy white robe, she skidded to a halt. She wouldn't survive a confrontation with Ezra, not

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and be able to hold her tongue. She closed her eyes and wisped away into the air, hoping Ezra hadn't seen her aura before she could disappear.

"There is something amiss with your granddaughter," Ezra announced in a bored tone of voice.

Oscar glided toward the beveled glass doors at the end of the hallway. "You always say that, Ezra. You know how headstrong Rianna is, but she always manages to make things right." Though Oscar tried to sound convincing, he wasn't even sure he believed the words.

Ezra harrumphed, following Oscar. "She will be attending tonight's meeting, then?"

Oscar winced. He hadn't instructed Rianna to attend and without an invitation or prompt, Rianna would make sure she was as far away from Ezra as possible. "I don't believe so, no."

Ezra floated into the gilded room housing the life files of those who had passed on. Every spirit's life could be read inside these walls and Ezra made sure no one entered without his permission.

"Please have a seat and let's discuss this further." Ezra swept a hand toward a red velvet chair and solidified into his human form. As he sank down behind a polished birch desk, he let out a sigh of pure pleasure. "Ah, I miss this type of living."

Oscar sat across from him and grunted. "You could enjoy it more often were you not so stubborn."

Ezra gave him an almost wounded look. "I take my position as leader here quite seriously."

Oscar scratched his cheek, more to feel his own solid form than to alleviate any itch. He, too, missed the simple things in life. "You take it too seriously."

Ezra's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Oscar folded his hands across his rotund stomach. "Indeed, I am. I see no harm in allowing the spirits to walk the Earth below. Trapping them here will only serve to make them rebel even more."

"Perhaps you would like to assume the responsibility of ensuring the safety of all mortals yourself." Ezra leaned forward, thumping the desk top with a closed fist. "If I allow one ghost to roam free, I will have an uprising. They will all want to frolic among the mortals and I will not be able to keep track of them all." He let out a huffy breath and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "A free ghost is a

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harmful ghost, Oscar. You don't need me to tell you that. You've seen the destruction with your own eyes."

Oscar got to his feet. "That was from a band of spirits who were as disgruntled in death as they had been in life. They should have gone to Oblivion instead of being given the opportunity to redeem themselves here."

Ezra's jaw tightened. "That is not my decision to make."

Oscar strolled to the row of golden cabinets. "Nor was it a slur against you. I am simply saying that you cannot punish many for the sins of one."

"It is not a punishment," Ezra roared, leaping to his feet. "And get away from those cabinets."

Oscar turned slowly and fixed the leader with a long, studious look. "Do you suspect me now, too? Were we not friends for many years upon the Earth? Did I not save your life many times over thereby enabling you to die at an older age?"

Red colored Ezra's face and he puffed out his cheeks. "You know this isn't easy for me, Oscar. I know Rianna is your granddaughter and that you were grief-stricken when she joined us here, but this is her life now. She needs to learn to accept it."

Oscar placed one hand atop the first cabinet in the row and the gold vibrated beneath his palm. He kept his features even, allowing not even the barest trace of surprise to color his voice when he replied. "If you truly believe Rianna will ever accept the rules here, you don't know my granddaughter." He dropped his hand and curled it into a fist, storing the emanations against his palm to read at a later time.

Ezra's shoulders slumped. "I do not want to have to banish her."

Oscar whirled. "And you will not."

Ezra's eyes flashed. "And if I do?"

"I will call in every favor I have here to unseat you."

Rage flashed momentarily in Ezra's eyes before he quickly lowered his head. "Then I suggest you discuss this with Rianna and see if the two of you can come to a more palatable solution."

"Or?"

Ezra drummed his fingers on top of the desk. "Or I will do as my position instructs me."

Caleb stretched the map out atop a rock warmed by the sun's rays and knelt down in front of it. He followed the pencil marks with his finger and lifted his eyes toward the mountain in front of him. If his calculations were accurate, he was less than a day away from the cave.

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“Hello, Caleb.” The sultry voice punched him in the solar plexus and Caleb climbed slowly to his feet.

“Ah, the mysterious lady on the bank.”

She laughed and the sound warmed him. He wondered if he was losing his sanity bit by hellacious bit. “You remember me.”

“I’m not likely to forget you.”

She walked forward, but the way her hips rolled when she approached him, made her appear to glide over the carpet of grass. She extended her hand and Caleb’s eyes fell to the glossy fingertips. “My name is Rianna.”

Rianna. He whispered the name in his mind. “It’s a pleasure to actually meet you.” He took her hand in his and squeezed her fingers lightly. Awareness flared in the depths of those doe-like brown eyes. “Do you live around here?”

She licked her lips slowly and the sight of her small, pink tongue sent shivers down Caleb’s spine. He swallowed hard and willed himself not to drag her into his arms and feast on the exquisiteness of her mouth.

“You could say that,” she finally responded.

He laughed slightly. “That’s classified.”

She inclined her head slowly and waves of chestnut hair tumbled forward. “You could say that. What brings you to Romania?”

He noticed the lack of accent in her voice. “Vacation and you?”

“Not too many people come to Romania to visit.”

“They don’t know what they’re missing.” He bantered in return, determined to keep pace with her verbal swordplay.

She tugged her hand free and slid it down over her thigh and Caleb’s eyes followed the glide of her fingers. She wore tight-fitting black slacks and a waist-hugging white top, which dipped low, over her breasts. Each time he saw her, she devastated his equilibrium. He’d never experienced this kind of breathless anticipation before and he didn’t even know what he was anticipating.

“You’re not really here just to visit Romania, are you?”

“Why do you want to know?” Casually, Caleb refolded the map and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans.

She lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug, but Caleb decided it was a calculated move. “I like learning things about our visitors.”

“So where exactly do you live?”

She lifted a finger and pointed overhead. “Over the mountain.”

“And you just happened to be in the neighborhood, right?”

Walking Through Fire

Rianna grinned and Caleb's body grew taut. "I had a dream about you last night," she whispered.

All the blood rushed from Caleb's head to the aching spot between his thighs. He shifted from one foot to the other, seeking relief from the throbbing. How could this woman entice him with just a sentence?

He bent to pick up his backpack. "A good dream, I hope."

She walked around him and Caleb felt her eyes on his ass. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have minded. He'd always been told he had an eye-catching ass, but this time, he felt uncomfortable, like Rianna was assessing far more than just his manly attributes.

"As far as dreams go, it wasn't too bad."

Caleb chuckled. "That's really going to help my ego."

She touched his back and his skin jumped. She flattened her palm against the indentation above the waistband of his jeans.

"What are you doing?"

"Touching you," she responded in a maddeningly calm voice.

Caleb whirled around and caught her wrist before her hand could do any damage to the front of his body. "Why?"

Her eyes lifted to his and she stared at him for a long moment.

Caleb's breath left his lungs on a whoosh of air. "It wasn't a dream, was it?"

She didn't blink.

He dragged her closer. "You came to me last night, didn't you?" When she didn't respond, he tightened his grip. "Didn't you?"

"If you think to hurt me, you need to try a little harder."

Caleb released her instantly. "My intention isn't to hurt you, but why did you come to me?"

"I sensed it had been a long time since you had a woman."

His temper climbed. "And it's your duty to go around giving blowjobs to sex-starved men you don't know? Bullshit. Why don't you tell me the truth? Do you have a husband who keeps you locked up so you escape when he's at work? Or is it a strict father? What is it that would entice you to go down on a man you've barely met?"

Rianna tipped her head to one side. "I take my pleasures where I can find them."

Not quite the response he expected. "And you can't find your pleasures in an ordinary relationship?"

Her smile wobbled. "I can't have an ordinary relationship, Caleb."

He stared at her, feeling her grief. The pain emanating from her stunned him. "Why?"

Walking Through Fire

With her eyes closed, she began to fade.

Rianna felt the wrath of the spirits the second she slipped into the realm and though she knew she'd be summoned in a matter of minutes, she slipped through wall after wall, trying to get away as fast as she could. She needed time to regroup and to decide what to do next.

She'd taken a risk by allowing Caleb to see her true form and not just by thumbing her nose at the Spirit Council. Caleb could bring other mortals to the mountains, mortals who would come simply for the thrill of possibly seeing a ghost. She didn't want to put herself on display, but the way she figured it, she didn't have a whole lot to lose.

If he thought about it long and hard, Caleb figured he could laugh about it. *How many people could actually say they'd seen a ghost?* He started walking slowly. A ghost. Unbelievable.

He scratched his head and increased his pace toward the base of the mountain. He wondered if he'd see her again or if her thrill came from seeing the shock on his face at her disappearance. If that was the case, she was in for a sad awakening.

As he started the climb, his thoughts centered on the ghost's beauty and he considered it a damn shame that something so beautiful could be alive in spirit only. She'd seemed so vibrant, so real. He'd touched her. He'd felt her mouth on his cock. As if tugged by a string, that particular part of his anatomy jumped to attention.

He'd see her again . . . even if he had to summon the ghost himself.

Rianna slipped into the heated water, allowing the hot springs to soothe her flagging determination. Once again, she'd defied the Council and materialized in the mortal world. She saw no harm in enjoying the fruits of her past life.

The water lapped at her thighs, her breasts and she let out a little hum of satisfaction. Only one thing . . . or person, rather, could make her mini-vacation even better.

"Hello, Rianna."

Her eyes popped open. Dreams did come true. She tipped her head back against the bank and looked up at him. "Hi." She noticed his eyes didn't focus on her face, but rather, stayed on the pert tips of her nipples peeking above the water line. She didn't move or try to hide. "Would you like to join me?"

Caleb squatted down to meet her eye to eye. "Why did you run away?"

Walking Through Fire

She trailed her fingertips in the water, creating tiny ripples. "I didn't run. I faded."

He dropped his hands down between his splayed thighs. "You know what I mean."

She closed her eyes. "Would you have believed me if I told you I was a ghost?" She cracked open one orb. "I've always thought it's better to show than tell."

He scooped up a stick with his right hand and began to thread it through his fingers. Long, strong, masculine fingers. Rianna shivered despite the heat of her bath.

"I don't know who you are or what you want with me." His jaw tightened and Rianna sensed his anger building. "But I think it's best if you stayed away."

She began to rise slowly from the water. "Is that really what you want?"

His eyes dropped and her body began to burn from the heat of his gaze. "You don't even know me."

"I know you're mortal."

He gave a bitter laugh. "You have no idea."

She stopped walking. "You're not mortal?" She heard the disappointment in her own voice.

Caleb stood and turned his back to her. "I don't know what I am."

"You're human." She tried again.

"I wish I could be so sure of that."

"Animal?" She suggested with a blatant invitation in her voice.

He pivoted slowly. "Is that what you're hoping?"

Naked and dripping water, she came to a stop in front of him. "Is there something so wrong with seeking to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh while you still can?" She swept her arms wide. "One day, all of this may fade away. In a moment," she snapped her fingers, "my life was cut short. I spent the first year or so in eternity regretting the things I hadn't done."

Caleb lifted one eyebrow. "And you regretted never seducing a stranger you met in the forest?"

She grinned. "Actually, I've done that once before." She touched his arm. "That was a joke."

He scowled at her. "You don't know what kind of danger you put yourself in."

"What could someone possibly do to me? Kill me?"

He didn't laugh. He focused his gaze straight ahead on the glistening water. "You should finish your bath. I need to get going."

"Where are you going?"

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He jutted his chin forward. "To the top of that mountain."

Rianna followed his point. "Are you crazy? Not even a billy goat could climb that mountain. There's nothing but rocks and stumps and it's straight up. You'd have to be insane."

"Or desperate," he finished.

"Are you?"

He blinked once and looked down into her upturned face. "Am I what?"

"Desperate?"

His eyes raked her dripping body. "I'm getting there."

She pressed her palm against his chest. "How old are you, Caleb?"

His eyes darkened. "Why is that important?"

"I was twenty-two when I died. It's been six years although it feels like six hundred. Take my advice. Live as long as you can because what comes after life isn't the sweet eternity everyone thinks it is."

He caught a strand of damp hair between his fingertips. "You're unhappy."

"You don't need to be an empath to see that."

His lips lifted slightly. "No, I don't, but the way you talk about your life does lead me to believe you were much happier alive."

"Who isn't?"

"Happier alive?" Caleb crammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I can think of a few."

The wind whistled all around them and Rianna shivered. Caleb immediately shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Where are your clothes?"

"I didn't wear any." She gave him a saucy wink over her shoulder. "No one was supposed to see me here."

He gave her a disbelieving look. "I find that hard to believe." He gripped her shoulders. "You knew I was coming this way, didn't you?"

Rianna stood on tiptoe and grazed his chin with her lips. "What kind of ghost would I be if I couldn't follow a mere mortal without being sensed?"

"A mere mortal? Is that what you think I am?"

She felt his fury. "Isn't that what you are?"

He thrust her from him and walked away. "No, I'm not."

"Then what are you?"

"Unlike you, I choose not to reveal my secrets."

Walking Through Fire

The bitterness of his tone disturbed her. “You’ve been carrying this secret around for a long time, haven’t you?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Were you a therapist in your past life?”

She chuckled. “Actually, I was a free spirit.” She walked closer to him and pried his arms free. “Why don’t we walk for awhile? I think it would do us both some good.”

He blinked at her for a long moment, long enough for Rianna to think he was going to deny her request, but then, he took hold of her hand and began to walk. “You need clothes.”

She stopped walking. “You’re absolutely right. I’ll be right back.” She held up one finger. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“As if you couldn’t find me.”

She lifted her shoulders and faded away, his jacket falling to the ground.

Caleb couldn’t believe he waited for a ghost. He shook his head ruefully and dragged his fingers through his neatly trimmed hair. He should just start walking and maybe the vixen would get the hint, but did he really want her to take the hint? He leaned over, picking up this discarded coat. Did he want her to leave him alone?

He didn’t think so. For some reason, he came alive when he saw her and that told him a lot. He’d never met another woman he’d willingly risk his own heart for, not since, Anna. He’d loved her more than life itself, but time passed on and so did she, leaving him alive to mourn her for eternity.

An invisible hand squeezed his heart and he took a deep breath to calm himself. He turned on his heel and began walking. As the leaves snapped beside him, he knew he was no longer alone. “That didn’t take you very long.” From the corner of his eye, he saw Rianna now wore snug-fitting jeans and a simple cotton T-shirt. To the ordinary eye, she would appear normal . . . mortal.

She flashed him a grin. “I can do everything quickly now.”

“You mean now that you’re dead?” He regretted the words the instant they slipped out, but Rianna didn’t flinch.

“Yeah, I guess that’s one of the perks.”

“Is another one of the perks mingling with people who are alive?”

Now, she winced. “Sort of.”

Caleb studied her profile for a long second before reading between the lines. “Ah.”

She spared him a look. “What does that mean?”

“Ah. It’s an exclamation meant to express understanding.” He saw her frown.

Walking Through Fire

“So what are you saying is that you understand?”

“No. That you’re not supposed to be down here.” Caleb coughed. “I assume it’s down here and not up here.”

Rianna made a rude noise. “I’m in a place called Harmony and it’s,” she stopped and tipped her head back before she pointed overhead, “up there all right. Way up there. And no, I’m not supposed to be down here, but listening to elevator music and watching the elders float across the floors isn’t exactly my idea of entertainment.”

“Is that what you’re looking for from me? Entertainment?”

“And if I say it is?”

“I’d tell you that I’m too busy to be a carnival ride.”

“What about being a dream lover?”

All the breath whooshed out of Caleb’s lungs. Her words created a fury inside his stomach. “You took a big chance.”

“So did you. By agreeing to walk with me, you put yourself in the line of fire.”

He laughed abruptly. “You mean, my life might be threatened?”

Her eyes narrowed as she swiveled her head to look at him. Caleb caught the scent of some type of exotic fragrance. He doubted it was perfume. “Don’t sound so disbelieving. The Council can be a particular lot.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not easily eliminated.”

“You say that like it’s happened before.”

“Others have tried, yes.”

Rianna walked on in silence for a few moments before finally asking, “how did you manage to stay alive?”

“That’s something you’ll have to ask the Fates or the karma gods, or whomever you know up there who controls the lives and deaths of us mere mortals.”

“That sounded bitter.”

“Sue me.”

She chuckled. “You’ve lived a long time, haven’t you?”

Caleb sighed and took her hand again. Though he’d promised himself he’d keep his secret, he found himself relaying the pain anyway. “I’m two days away from turning two hundred and ten years old.”

Rianna sighed. “Well, that explains it then.”

Confusion clouded his face. “Explains what?”

“My attraction to you. I’ve always liked older men.”

Walking Through Fire

Caleb stared at her for a long moment before he tossed back his head and laughed like he couldn't remember laughing in his entire life. And while the amusement overwhelmed him, his common sense continued to scream, "Run!"

Walking Through Fire

Chapter Three

“This is unacceptable.” Ezra’s anger encompassed the gathered group of spirits. “I will not have one of our own flaunting her abilities in front of a mortal.” He spat the final word as if an epithet.

Oscar rolled his eyes and slouched down in a wicker chair. “Ezra, the girl is doing no harm.”

Ezra snorted derisively. “I am not surprised to hear you say that, Oscar, given that she was your granddaughter in the mortal world, but in case you haven’t noticed,” he swept a hand wide, “we’re in the spirit world now. And there are rules!”

Oscar got to his feet slowly, wishing the spirit world had put an end to all of his aches and pains. He waved one hand slowly and turned toward the door. “Ezra, if you weren’t already dead, this anxiety would kill you. My granddaughter, and she still is my granddaughter, by the way, is merely enjoying the afterlife, probably better than any of us are. Seriously,” he pivoted and skated a glance at a full-figured spirit with glasses perched on the end of her nose, “Betsy, can you say you’re enjoying yourself now?”

Betsy pursed her lips and fidgeted with the ties on her plaid blouse. “Well, I don’t think it’s really my place to say.”

Oscar grumbled his way toward the door. “Of course not. We’re so busy trying to follow rules up here that we can’t take time to realize our lives are over.” He heard the collective gasps behind him, but plowed on anyway. “We’re dead, folks, and the sooner we realize this is the end of the line for us, the better off we’ll all be.”

Ezra came down off the dais with a loud thump of his feet against the parquet flooring. “That is where you are wrong, Oscar. This is most certainly not the end of the line. Anyone who chooses not to follow the rules can certainly find themselves in a much different place, one not so, well, abiding.”

Oscar wondered if he slugged the leader if Ezra would feel the pain. He placed his hand on the doorknob and gave himself a mental timeout before he responded to Ezra’s thinly-veiled threat. “You know, Ezra, if I thought it would be worth my while, I would kick your ass.”

He slipped out into the passageway, leaving the realm sniggering behind him.

Walking Through Fire

Rianna didn't want to go back to the realm and yet, she knew the time would come when she would need to return. She couldn't maintain her physical body for longer than twenty-four hours.

Caleb walked along in silence, his hand brushing against hers every now and again and Rianna felt her soul stirring, a soul she might not be able to keep once Ezra and the elders discovered this latest indiscretion.

The winds began to increase in intensity and a rumble of thunder sounded overhead. Rianna caught hold of Caleb's hand and started to pull him.

"Where are we going?"

She tugged harder. "I know where there's a cabin."

Caleb jogged alongside her and they reached the dilapidated building before the deluge began. As the rain slashed the scarred glass panes, Rianna slammed the door shut and bolted the lock in place. She spun around and ran into a silvery web.

"Here. Let me get that for you." Caleb swept the air clean and held his hand out in front of him. "This way, my lady."

Rianna didn't remember the cabin being so uninviting. She wrinkled her nose as the musty odors reached her nostrils and her shoes scuffed against layers of dust and dirt on the plank floors. "This place is a dump."

Caleb shifted the mattress on the makeshift bed and thumped it free of debris. Skittering footsteps caused Rianna to grimace. "I've never liked rodents," she declared.

He turned to look over his shoulder. "It's not like they can harm you . . . or me for that matter."

She trudged over to the edge of the bed and plunked down. The box springs creaked warningly. "This shouldn't last long and then we can go after whatever it is that you're hunting." She braced her hands behind her and looked up at him. "Where exactly is it anyway?"

Caleb strolled to the cluttered fireplace. "How long do these storms usually last?"

"Hey." Rianna snapped her fingers. "I asked you a question that had nothing to do with the storm."

He looked over his shoulder. "Hey. If I'd wanted to answer you, I would have."

"Have you always been this stubborn?"

"Not always, but I've had years to hone the art."

Something furry scurried across Rianna's hands and she scrambled to her feet, dancing around the room in a furious circle while Caleb stared at her. When she finally

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stopped, she crammed her hands on her hips and glared defiantly at him. “Even ghosts can get spooked.”

His lips twitched and he ran one finger along the mantle. “Obviously, no one’s been here in a while.”

“That’s because the owners passed on some time ago.” She flashed him a wicked grin. “I know them personally.”

Caleb pointed a finger toward the ceiling. “They’re up there, then?”

She bobbed her head. “Unfortunately. One is the leader of the Spirit Council, Ezra McNamara. He’s also the chief pain in the ass in the realm.”

“Sounds like you’re his biggest fan.”

The laughter in Caleb’s voice didn’t bother her. “Ezra and I have never seen eye to eye.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I don’t follow the rules.”

Caleb spun and clasped one hand over his heart. “Imagine that.”

She shrugged. “You’d think a dead person would get a break.”

“So what happens if you don’t follow the rules?”

“Ezra yells a lot.”

“And what else could happen?” Caleb walked toward her and Rianna saw the intensity deep in his eyes. For some reason, her answer mattered a great deal to him.

Rianna tried to shrug her way out of a response, but when Caleb touched her, she told him the truth. “I could be sent away.”

His eyebrow lifted. “To?”

“The Netherworld or Oblivion.”

“They sound like board games.”

She gave an abrupt chuckle and pushed away from him. “Well, trust me when I tell you they’re no games. I’ve heard bad things about both of them, although, I believe I could survive the Netherworld . . .so to speak.”

“Why do you push the limits if you know you’re taking a risk?”

When had he gotten so close to her again? She walked away, but he followed. She stopped walking. “Why are you following me?”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed. “Because I think you know something that could help me find what I’m looking for.”

“What could I possibly know? I’m a ghost.”

“You see things.”

Rianna laughed. “I see everything. It’s one of the benefits of an ethereal body.”

Walking Through Fire

Caleb moved his hand along her jaw line and Rianna shivered. “Don’t tell me I spook you.”

She leaned into his palm. “What you do to me spooks me and what could happen.”

“What could happen?”

She licked her lips and when she raised her hand, she saw the other side of the room through her skin. Damn. She closed her eyes. “I have to go back.”

“And leave me here by myself?” He pulled her close and Rianna’s head began to spin.

“I can’t stay.” She showed him her hand. “I’m fading.”

Caleb frowned. “How often does this happen?”

“The longest I can stay corporeal is twenty-four hours.”

“You haven’t been with me that long,” he reminded her.

She began to fade. “I have to go back.”

Caleb’s hands dropped to his side. “I can’t stop you from running.”

She solidified. “I’m not running.”

“Ah, she returns. Don’t forget that it was you who first approached me.”

“I’m aware of who approached whom.”

“So why are you so interested in leaving?”

She struggled to remain tangible. “Caleb, I really have to go. This isn’t my choice.”

He reached for her, but his hands sank into thin air. “Someone else can do this to you?”

“Without a doubt,” she muttered seconds before she disintegrated into a faint mist.

Seconds later, she stood facing the Spirit Council.

Ezra adjusted the wire-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose and glowered at Rianna over the top of the frames. “I suppose I don’t need to tell you why you’re here.”

Rianna tucked her hands behind her back and remained stoically silent. She could say nothing, which would dig her out of the trouble she was in at present. She doubted the medicine would be palatable.

The Spirit Council surrounded Ezra with folded hands and serene faces. They all stared straight ahead and Rianna figured something would soon hit the fan.

“You have nothing to say for yourself, Rianna?” Ezra’s voice boomed across the room and bounced off the curved walls.

Walking Through Fire

“Is there anything I can say in my defense which will prevent you from pronouncing sentence?”

The Council murmured among themselves, shaking their head and tsking at Rianna’s impertinence.

“Now is the time for repentance not sarcasm,” Ezra pointed out.

Rianna knew she should keep her mouth closed. Every instinct inside of her told her to remain silent, but just as she never listened to the elders, she wouldn’t listen to her own common sense, either. She squared her shoulders and began her diatribe. “You want me to repent for what exactly? Trying to enjoy the afterlife as much as possible instead of resigning myself to spending eternity in a morgue?” She opened her arms wide. “I mean, look at this place! It’s as solemn as a mortuary and heaven forbid any of us dare laugh inside these hallowed halls.” She clamped her hands on her hips. “You’ve taken on the role as leader of the Spirit Council and created a dais where all can worship at your feet, Ezra. Maybe this is to make up for the lack of respect you had in your mortal life. I’m not sure. What I am sure of is that I’m not going to kiss ass simply because I’m dead. Don’t you think dying should be enough for all of us? Don’t you think, hell, don’t any of you think, that we should focus on achieving that immortal peace all mortals talk about? If my peace is achieved by returning to the lands I love, then why should I be condemned for that?”

As Rianna’s explosion wound to a close, silence fell across the room save for the rustles of white robes as the Council exchanged glances with one another.

Ezra finally raised his hands and clapped, a mocking condemnation of Rianna’s impassioned speech. “You would have served yourself better by becoming an orator in life rather than a untrustworthy vagrant.”

Fury raced through Rianna’s bloodstream and she took a step forward. From her left side, her grandfather placed a hand on her arm. She’d never seen him approach. “Let go of me, Gramps. He deserves whatever I can give to him.”

Gramps kept his hand tight. “And what do you think you’re going to do? You can’t kill him.”

She acknowledged his words with a snap of her teeth. “No, but I can make him run.”

Gramps wrapped one arm around her shoulder and brought her head low to whisper in her ear. “Rianna, listen to me. You’re only going to make things worse for yourself. Stand tall and take your punishment. This will all be over in a matter of a few days.”

“Unless Ezra sends me to Oblivion.”

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Gramps shook his head forcefully. “He doesn’t have the ability to send you there on his own. The entire Council would have to be in agreement and whether she would admit it or not, Mrs. Adams likes your spunk. She would be the one abstaining party.”

Rianna considered his words carefully. “So I’m probably looking at The Netherworld then?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What do people do in that place all day long?”

“I would imagine most ruminate on the wrongs they’ve done to get them there.”

Gramps chuckled softly. “You will probably chafe until your sentence is up.”

Rianna smiled. “I would still like to kick Ezra’s butt.”

“Get in line,” Gramps added with a wry grin.

Rianna straightened and pinned a calm look on her face. “Hand down the sentence, Ezra, and try not to be smug about it.”

Ezra McNamara sailed to the edge of the dais, looming over Rianna. “For your indiscretions and flagrant disobedience of the rules of the Realm, you are hereby sentenced to seventy-two hours in The Netherworld. You will have no contact with mortal or spirit. I would suggest you use this time wisely, Rianna. I would not wish to pass down an even harsher punishment for your next violation.”

Before Rianna could speak, manacles clinked around her arms and legs. Though she winced, she didn’t cry out. She imagined Ezra would have liked that. She stood straight and tall while the spirit guards led her away, back down the hallway, past the Silent Suite and toward the door at the end of the hall, the door none dared to walk through of their own volition.

A burly guard sailed forward and inserted a key in the lock. “The door is impenetrable, Miss Rianna.”

She smiled at him. She’d always liked Sampson and she certainly couldn’t blame him for his chosen assignment in the Spirit world. “That’s just as well, Sam. I wouldn’t want my grandfather to get in trouble for visiting me.”

Sampson tugged the door open and a blast of wind smacked Rianna in the face. She shivered. “Is it always so cold in here?”

The guard nodded morosely. “I’m afraid so. You get no amenities here.”

Rianna cursed Ezra under her breath, but crossed the threshold without complaint.

“First door on your left, Miss Rianna, and good luck.” The metal hinges creaked ominously as Sampson pushed the door back into place.

“First door on the left,” Rianna muttered. “What happens if I take the second door instead?” She didn’t chance it. She tugged open the heavy steel door and walked

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into the room. "Perfect. A cell." As she spoke, the door evaporated and she found herself surrounded by four protected walls. Neither mortal nor spirit would communicate with her now.

She sat down on the edge of the cot and groaned. No mattress. The Council had thought of everything.

Caleb wished he could stop thinking about her. Or then again, maybe he didn't. He missed seeing her smile. The thought made him laugh. How could he miss a woman he barely knew? Scratch that, how could he miss a ghost he barely knew?

The sun beat down on the top of his head and he removed the baseball cap and drew his arm across his damp forehead. He couldn't be more than a few miles from the base of the Fagaras Mountain. He leaned back against a stately pine and withdrew the map, following the old timer's drawing with one finger.

He'd lost a night in the cabin, but he had nothing but time. He wouldn't leave Romania without what he came for.

"Hello, Caleb."

The voice startled him and Caleb's senses went on alert. He stared at the gruff-looking old man with the shock of white hair and beard and the booming voice. "Hello. Do I know you?"

The elderly gent chuckled and his belly bounced. "No, but you know someone I know." His eyes twinkled and Caleb thought of St. Nick. "My granddaughter, Rianna."

Caleb forgot all about the map. "Where is she? I haven't seen her in a day or so."

Some of the happiness faded from the old man's face. "She's away for a few days. Should be back late tomorrow evening."

Caleb clamped the cap back on his head and folded his arms. "I thought you were dead."

"Ah, that I am." The gent lowered his voice. "I snuck away."

"So what happened to Rianna? Did she get in trouble?"

"She told you she was taking a risk, then?"

Caleb stuffed the map back into his pocket and moved away from the tree. "She mentioned it."

"My name's Oscar, Oscar Bonovich. My granddaughter has taken quite the fancy to you."

Caleb didn't know how much to reveal to the old man despite his heritage. "Yeah, well, in case you didn't know this, your granddaughter is one of the dearly departed."

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Oscar fell into step beside Caleb. "Doesn't stop her from liking you."

Caleb slid a glance toward the old man and noticed the frown. "You don't approve?"

"You're a mortal."

"Not exactly."

Oscar harrumphed and tromped his boots hard against the ground. "I'm old and dead, but I'm not stupid, boy. I know you're an immortal."

Caleb stopped walking, his legs refusing to move. "How do you know that? What do you know? Do you know something you could tell me?"

Oscar held up one hand. "Now, hold on a second. Just because I know what you are doesn't mean I know how you got to be that way. To me, it doesn't seem important."

"You can say that. You're dead."

Oscar glowered at him. "I wish you'd stop saying that."

Caleb smothered a grin at the cranky response. "Tell me where Rianna is."

"The Netherworld."

Caleb winced. "She mentioned that before. Said it wasn't a nice place."

The white head bobbed. "True, true, but she's a tough one, my granddaughter. She's making it."

Caleb's head lifted toward the sun. "Can she see me?"

Oscar slapped him on the shoulder. "My boy, what do you think has gotten her through the past day and a half?"

Rianna cleared the window with the hem of her blouse and peered closer. "Gramps, what are you doing down there?" She should have known Oscar Bonovich wouldn't be content to sit on the sidelines. She hadn't asked him to go to Caleb, but Gramps would know she'd want to get a message to him.

She saw Caleb frown and her curiosity intensified. "I'm not so sure you should be listening to him, Caleb." Another blast of cold air chilled her skin and she dragged the one meager blanket off the cot and wrapped it around her. She wondered if Ezra felt her wrath. She hoped so.

Gramps started walking again and Caleb fell into step beside him. They appeared to be deep in conversation, but every so often, Caleb would look up at the sky. She placed her hand over the frosted glass and waggled her fingers.

"Whatever you do, Gramps, don't help him find what he's looking for."

"So Caleb, you going to tell me what you're looking for here in Romania?"

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Caleb figured the old man would get around to the real reason he'd made an appearance. "What makes you think I'm looking for something? Lots of people come to Romania to visit its beautiful mountains."

Oscar snorted. "Don't pee on my leg and tell me it's raining, boy. I know you're not here as a tourist. You've got that hunted look in your eyes."

"If I'm looking for something, I should have that type of look in my eyes, shouldn't I?"

Oscar ruffled his beard with the tips of his fingers. "You're a cagey one."

So are you. Caleb shrugged. "How long are you going to walk with me?"

"How long is it going to take to tell me what you're looking for?"

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"True. True, but if you don't tell someone, how do you expect them to help you find it?"

Caleb whipped his head toward the old man's wrinkled profile. "What did you just say?"

"Did you not hear me?"

Caleb had always hated word games. Mind games even worse. "Are you offering to help me find what I need?"

"That depends."

Ah, the caveat. Caleb's face cleared and he inclined his head shortly. "I didn't think a ghost needed money."

Oscar's face contorted. "Money? What in the hell are you talking about, boy?"

"Isn't that what you're about to ask? You'll help me find whatever it is that I'm looking for in exchange for a hefty sum of money?" Not that Caleb wouldn't consider it. Having lived as long as he had, he had more than enough money to last another ten lifetimes, which, he inevitably would live.

"I'm not interested in your money, Mr. Jensen."

One eyebrow lifted, Caleb studied the grandfather. "I don't recall giving you my last name."

"You didn't give me your first, either."

The old goat had a point. "So what does your assistance depend on then?"

Oscar leveled Caleb with a hard look. "I'll help you find what you need. In exchange, you promise to stay away from my granddaughter."

Rianna gasped and smacked the glass. "Gramps, you can't do this!" The shout merely bounced off the walls, ineffectual in reaching its target. She leaped to her feet and

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began a solitary pace around the room. What did he think he was doing, but most importantly, would Caleb listen to him?

She fell to her knees in front of the tiny, bubbled window in the floor of the cell. Though she couldn't hear their words, she could clearly read her grandfather's lips. She had no doubt that was his intention all along. He wanted her to know he would do whatever it took to protect her.

"I don't need your help, Gramps. I can take care of myself." The room began to rock and with a curse, Rianna scrambled back to her feet and raced toward the hand bars attached to the back corner of the wall.

In her first night inside the airless room, she'd learned quickly to hold on when the rumbling began. As the floor rolled wave after wave, she braced her feet against the walls and gritted her teeth. She didn't know what caused the tremors, but she counted on Ezra's hand in the additional torture.

When the room righted itself and the rocking ceased, she dropped back to the floor and dove toward the window. She couldn't see them anymore. The window had gone black.

One second Caleb opened his mouth to respond to Oscar's condition and in the next instant, the old man faded away. Caleb clamped his hands on his hips and swiveled his head around to search the area.

"All right, well, I guess he didn't want my answer," Caleb muttered. He took two steps forward and came to an abrupt halt, face to face with a mountain of a man who didn't look particularly welcoming.

"You shouldn't be here."

The ominous tones of the man's voice should have unnerved Caleb, but after spending the last three days dealing with ghosts and the last two centuries dealing with life, Caleb didn't spook so easily.

"Why not?" Caleb lowered his backpack to the carpet of leaves.

"You don't get to ask questions."

"No? Then what do I get to do?"

"Leave." A long growl accompanied the guttural tones and Caleb saw the man's companion, a lean, hungry-looking wolf, approaching from the right.

Caleb almost groaned aloud. He'd been stabbed, shot, lanced, burned, and tortured in numerous other ways. But he hadn't been a wild animal's snack. And he heard that wolves kept eating until their dinner joined the land of the dead.

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He scratched the back of his neck and tried not to grin at the humor of the situation.

The wolf had just found his very first eternally live dinner.

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Chapter Four

Rianna saw the wolf and knew, what it felt like to have her heart stop a second time. Caleb stood facing the animal, his hands on his hips, his face a mask of calm. She wanted to scream at him, tell him to run, but knew he wouldn't hear her.

The furry animal moved closer, his forelegs low. Rianna recognized the attack mode and Rianna's hands curled into fists. The mountain man remained still, holding a wooden spear like a favored pet, his beard twitching. Rianna wanted to curl her hands around the asshole's thick neck.

Caleb watched the wolf approaching and Rianna noted his posture changing. He readied himself for the attack and Rianna screamed, calling for her grandfather. Surely, he could see what was about to happen. How could he just leave Caleb to fend for himself?

Growling, hackles rising, the wolf's muscles bunched and Rianna covered her eyes. With a long snarl, the animal lunged forward. Rianna spread her fingers to peek through. Caleb met the wolf's jowls with a right hook. The animal yelped and tumbled to the ground. The mountain man tensed.

"Not so casual now, are ya, big fella?" Rianna smirked. Her own fists punched the air as if by doing so, she could guide Caleb's hands. He didn't need her help as he fought the wolf.

The gray-haired animal attacked again, catching Caleb in the solar plexus with the pads of its paws. Caleb went down, but he took the wolf with him. Man and beast rolled together on the ground, scuffling and tumbling while the mountain man roared his approval.

Rianna wished, not for the first time, that she had one ounce of her grandfather's abilities. She glared down through the blurry glass and focused all of her energies on the skirmish. She saw white, gleaming teeth sink into Caleb's forearm and though he winced, Caleb made no sound.

Caleb managed to push himself back to his feet and with his muscles tensing, he gave the wolf a hearty toss. As the animal flew through the air, the mountain man cried

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out with a mixture of fear and rage. The man rushed forward, tackling Caleb and taking him down.

Rianna climbed to her feet and shouted with fury. “Someone help him!” Her words bounced off the walls. From the corner of her eye, she saw movement and a flash of white. “Is that you, Ezra? Dammit, is that you? So help me, I’ll send you to Oblivion myself for this! Damn you!”

She heard a cry of pain and fell back to her knees. The mountain man’s spear protruded from the center of Caleb’s chest and he lay as still as a frozen body. She clamped her hands against her mouth. He couldn’t be dead, could he? No, he wasn’t dead. He was immortal.

The man lifted the injured wolf into his arms and began walking, leaving Caleb behind. A long trail of blood trickled down Caleb’s side and coursed onto the ground, darkening the leaves.

Pain seared his chest and Caleb’s arms felt like lead, but he knew he needed to move. Even worse, he would need to pull the spear free. He cracked open one eye and stared at the thick wood standing upwards from his chest cavity. By all rights, he shouldn’t be alive now. Sometimes, immortality was a bitch.

He struggled to his feet and swore he heard the wind breathe a sigh of relief. He tossed his head back to see the sky. “I hope you can’t see this, Rianna.” He gripped the root of the spear and gave it a mighty tug.

His knees wobbled and he struggled to remain upright as the heavy oak tore through muscle and tendons before finally popping free of his ripped flesh. “Jesus,” he whispered, breathing in deep, restorative gulps of air.

He staggered to a nearby tree and planted his hands against the gnarled trunk and waited. In a matter of seconds, the healing would begin. No, he couldn’t die, but he could damn sure feel the pain of every wound and the scars would remain.

As his muscles began to rejuvenate, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against his knuckles. He heard every sound his body made as the tendons reunited, the blood flowed over the damaged ligaments and the wound sealed, leaving behind a grim reminder of the mountain man’s nasty temper.

Weak, but restored, Caleb straightened, lifting his bloody shirt away from his body. “So much for my favorite shirt,” he muttered.

Laughter and quiet applause responded.

Caleb didn’t bother to look behind him. “I suppose that was your doing?”

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Oscar came forward and clamped a hand down on Caleb's shoulder. "I knew what you were when I met you, but I had to be sure."

Caleb tore the shirt from his shoulders. "You could have asked."

"Not all immortals like to talk about this part of their lives."

Caleb spared the old man a hard look. "You should have given me the choice."

Oscar bobbed his snowy white head. "True, true. One of the hazards of my past, I suppose. Now, shall we finish our conversation?"

Caleb shook his hand off. "I don't believe we have anything to discuss."

Oscar frowned. "Are you going to be pissy then?"

"You had a wolf and a man the size of a small oak tree attack me and you think I'm going to be interested in a conversation with you?"

Oscar folded his arms and Caleb saw the man's lips twitched. "I knew you wouldn't die."

"But did you know how much it would hurt?"

"Life is about pain, Caleb."

Caleb held up one hand. "Spare me the platitudes. You're not the one who just pulled a stake out of your chest."

"No, but I am the one who died," Oscar pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Then you're the lucky one." Caleb began walking.

"I'm not going away," Oscar called after him.

"I couldn't be that lucky."

"Bad things happen when you interfere with humans, Rianna."

Ezra's voice brought Rianna to her feet. She walked toward the opened door, but stopped before she touched the invisible force field. Ezra would not be so stupid as to open the door without protecting himself.

"Did you come to gloat?"

He gave her a sympathetic frown. "You know, I spent time in here once."

Rianna didn't fake interest in his walk down memory lane. "How nice for you. Isn't my time in here about up?"

Ezra snorted with irritation. "I came to have a conversation with you and to possibly commute your sentence."

Rianna bowed low. "Ah, the great king coming to accept a humble apology from his inferior." Ezra took corporeal form and when his feet snapped against the concrete outside the door, Rianna raised one eyebrow. "Why, Ezra, it appears I have angered you in some way. Do tell me how I managed to do that so I can remember to use it again."

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“You make jokes and crack your smiles, Rianna, but you and I both know you don’t belong here. You should have been sent straight to Oblivion when you died. What the Fates were thinking, I’ll never know.”

Rianna studied her nails. “Perhaps they were thinking they knew more than you do.”

Ezra began to back down the hallway. “Have it your way. I came to offer you a chance to free yourself from prison.”

“You came to gloat,” she contradicted.

His eyes shot sparks. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I take no pleasure in your confinement. You are one of my people.”

“No,” she snapped, leaning forward, placing her face in dangerous proximity to the force field. “I am not one of your people. I am an independent person.”

“You are a ghost!” he shouted in return.

Her anger intensified. “Not by choice.”

“Does anyone ever really die by choice?”

She smacked her hand against the invisible wall and the electricity sizzled and snapped. “Look, I don’t want to be here with you anymore than you want me here, but apparently, the Fates get to make these decisions. So we have to deal with it. The sooner you learn to just accept that I’m not one to play by the rules, the better we’ll both get along.”

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with, Rianna.” Ezra’s voice came out on a tired sigh. “There are consequences to your actions.”

“You mean like this? I can handle the Netherworld, Ezra.”

He shook his head and for a brief moment, Rianna swore she saw honest regret in his eyes, but then his features became placid again. “You think we are here to simply exist in perpetuity. You don’t know our true purpose because you’ve never taken the time to find out. You never cared enough to find out.”

Rianna straightened and tucked her arms underneath her breasts. “Then tell me what this noble purpose is that I might learn and change my ways.”

His jaw clenched and he spun on his heel. “Have your laugh. I will not be a part of your obvious indifference to matters of greater importance than your own free will.” His boots clicked against the concrete and metal hinges creaked with protest as he let himself out of the frigid hallway.

Rianna remained standing at the open door for a long moment, wondering if there was even the remotest possibility that Ezra had information he wanted to impart. His words sounded like a warning, but then, Ezra had always been an over reactor. Either

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way, perhaps it was time she started paying more attention to her surroundings before whatever doom Ezra's voice foretold came to pass.

Caleb tugged the damp boot off his foot and wiggled his toes. Night closed in and he made camp for the night, not that he would sleep. He'd finally managed to convince Oscar that he was in desperate need of a few hours of shut-eye and though the old codger probably didn't believe him, Oscar had reluctantly departed. Now, instead of sleeping, Caleb he lay back against the unyielding ground and stared up at the stars, wondering if one of them somehow held Rianna.

"I don't know if you can hear me." He chuckled at his own foolishness. "It seems stupid to talk to you like this, but what the hell. It can't hurt and it's not like there's anyone else around to talk to." He stacked his hands behind his head. "I don't know why I want to talk to you so badly."

"Because you miss me," came the impish response.

Caleb shot straight up and stared ahead at Rianna's ghostly vision. "You're here." His voice held wonder as his climbed to his feet.

She held up one misty hand. "You can't touch me. I shouldn't be here."

He walked closer anyway. "Is there ever a time when you should be here?"

She smiled. "This is taking a lot of effort, but I needed to see you."

"How did you come?"

"Astral projection."

"I thought you had to have a physical body to astral project."

Rianna waved away his comment. "Just listen to me. I know what you're looking for."

Caleb took another step toward her. "What are you talking about?"

"The book. You need the book."

He blinked at her. *How could she know? He'd told no one.* He pasted a smile on his face and crammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Nice try, but I'm not telling you anything."

"No, Caleb, you have to listen. Ezra came to see me."

Caleb searched his memory, the name not a familiar one. "Do I know him?"

Rianna waved a hand frantically. "I told you about him. He's the leader of the Spirit Council. Anyway, he came to see me, but I think it was more to warn me."

"Why would he do that? I thought you didn't care for one another."

"We don't, but I don't know, it's just a feeling I got."

"So what did he say to you?"

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“Nothing.”

Caleb stared at her fading form. “Nothing and that’s supposed to be a warning?” This was a Twilight Zone episode.

“It was what he didn’t say.”

He scrubbed the back of his neck and turned away from her. “Rianna, I think you need to go get some sleep or something. You’re not making a lot of sense.”

“Do you really think my grandfather came down here on his own?”

Caleb spun back around. “Would your grandfather set me up?”

“No, but he would do anything to keep me from being banished to Oblivion.”

“What is this Oblivion anyway?”

“It’s just like it sounds.”

Caleb expelled a long breath. “Sounds like hell.”

She winced. “You don’t know how right you are. Look, I only came to tell you to stay out of sight for a while, at least until I can come down there with you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” He saw the wounded look on her face and quickly amended his statement. “It’s not that I don’t want to see you, Rianna, but honestly, we’re two very different people. Maybe we just need to go our separate ways.”

She faded into nothingness without a response.

Caleb stared at the emptiness for a long moment before muttering, “I hope you understand I only said that to help you.” He headed back to the fire. Oblivion didn’t sound like any place he’d want to go and he’d be damned if he’d be responsible for sending Rianna there.

The second the door creaked open the following morning, Rianna floated to freedom, slipping through portal and back into the Spirit Realm. She sailed down the hallway, headed straight for her grandfather’s quiet place, the place he always sought out when in need of sanctuary.

She saw him sitting on the edge of a stone well, his hands dropped down between his knees. She moved toward him without sound, but he lifted his head anyway.

“Rianna.” He got to his feet and held out his arms.

She sank into his embrace. “Hi, Gramps.”

He hugged her tightly, tight enough to tell her that her suspicions had been accurate. She didn’t start grilling him right away. She gave him the few minutes he needed to reassure himself she was okay.

He kissed both of her cheeks and held her face in his palms. “You are all right then, my Rianna?”

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She covered his hands with hers. "I'm fine. Piece of cake."

His eyes filled with an unknown emotion, one Rianna didn't immediately recognize. "You should not joke about such things."

"Gramps, what is it? What's wrong?"

He released her instantly and dropped back down to the edge of the well. Here, in his solitude, he'd created the perfect image of a tranquil garden, complete with vivid green grass, an alluring blue sky and birds chirping in the background. For him, the scene served its purpose, even managed to fulfill him in some way, Rianna believed. He could take the world they'd left behind and recreate it here. She wondered why she couldn't.

"Nothing is wrong. I am just happy to see you." He patted the stone beside him.

Rianna sat. "Ezra came to see me yesterday."

Gramps' jaw clenched. "That Ezra is a wily one."

"You don't have to warn me, Gramps. I know." She reached for his hand and held it tight. "He sent you to Caleb, didn't he?"

Her grandfather lowered his head. "My heart is filled with grief, Rianna. I would not spend the rest of eternity in an existence where evil still reigns."

"What does Ezra want with Caleb?"

"I'm not even sure he wants Caleb, my Sweet."

"Then what does he want?"

Gramps threaded his fingers through hers. "Mortality."

Ezra presided over the Council, wearing his white robe and a benign expression. "I am afraid I have discovered some very disturbing news. Disturbing news indeed."

The room fell silent and every eye focused on Ezra's drawn face.

"You have all heard the stories of the Book of Secrets, the book which holds all the secrets of our universe." Murmurs accompanied his words, but Ezra held up a hand to restore order. "Please. Allow me to finish."

He stepped off the dais and walked among the other spirits. "There is one below who seeks this book, not to do good, but to rule over Earth and the other planets." Excited whispers broke out and filtered across the room. This time, Ezra gave them time to come to a halt before he spoke again.

"I have spoken with the Fates." A hush fell over the spirits. Ezra bobbed his head in a slow, methodical fashion. "They have given me strict orders. Our mission is to protect the book at all costs. As you know, the Fates cannot use their powers to harm. Therefore, we must protect the book for them."

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A hand rose at the back of the room and Ezra withheld a sigh. “Yes, Beau?”

A pale, thin ghost with a shock of white hair stood and folded his hands in front of his concave stomach. “Do we really know this is the man’s intent? Could he not merely be a traveler passing through? And why should we be concerned with the activities of Earth? Are we not above that mortal world now?”

Ezra wished he hadn’t allowed the spirit to speak. “The Fates have foretold the visitor’s intentions. And we are concerned with Earth because should it pass away, we could lose the very existence we have now.”

“How do we know of this book’s existence? We knew nothing of it while mortal,” Beau continued to throw up obstacles.

Ezra still maintained his composure. “I would imagine that would be a question for the Fates, but since you do not have access to them, you will simply have to take my word for it.”

Beau glared up at him. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I am under strict command and authority to send any unwilling protectors to Oblivion.”

The murmurs became shouts and cries of outrage and while Ezra slipped out of the room, Rianna dipped back into the shadows, taking this new information with her.

“You have to leave Romania.” Rianna didn’t waste time with greetings as she burst into the clearing where Caleb sat reloading his backpack.

He looked up and his hands stilled on the canvas. “It’s nice to see you, too, Rianna.”

She waved a hand, eager to speed up the conversation. “We don’t have time for that. You have to leave. I mean, right this instant.” She marched toward him and yanked the backpack from his hands. She shouldered the strap and began to walk away from him. “Come on. I’ll lead the way.”

“Where are you going?”

From the sound of his voice, Caleb wasn’t following her. Rianna stopped and looked back over her shoulder. “I thought I’d already made that clear. You need to get out of Romania. Tonight.”

Caleb pushed himself to his feet much slower than Rianna liked. She needed him to hurry, to move as fast as she her heart raced. “I can’t leave Romania yet, not until I get what I came for.”

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She dropped the pack and charged back toward him, thrusting her hands out to smack him full in the chest. He rocked, but otherwise, the force didn't affect him. "Are you not listening to me? I said..."

"I know exactly what you said, Rianna. Were you not listening to me?"

"You can't have the book."

His eyes frosted. "Who told you I was looking for the book?"

She rolled her eyes. "Come off of it, Caleb. Everyone in the realm knows you're looking for the Book of Secrets. You need it to find out why you're immortal."

Caleb shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and she noted, by the set of his jaw, that he wasn't happy with this turn of events. Not that she could blame him. To come so far for something only to be thwarted had to be a hefty punch to the abdomen.

While Caleb didn't move, Rianna returned to the backpack. "Now that you know I know, could we please move this along?"

"Why do I need to leave?"

She threw her hands in the air in a gesture of extreme irritation. *Could the man be any more obtuse?* "The Spirit Council knows you're here for the book."

"So? I don't want to harm the book, only read it."

"That's not allowed."

"By whom?"

She lifted the pack and dangled it from its strap. "I don't know. The Fates. The Council. Does it matter? You can't look at the book. End of story."

"No, it's not."

She stared at him across the distance. "It's not what?"

"It's not the end of the story. I'm not leaving Romania until I have what I came for."

"You've already said that and I've already told you that's not going to happen."

"No," he corrected her. "You said that's not allowed. You didn't say it wasn't going to happen."

Her own jaw snapped. A two-year-old couldn't have made her more irate. "Caleb," she spoke slowly, hoping he would catch on. "You may be immortal, but there are ways around even that loophole."

He chuckled and walked toward her. He took the backpack out of her grasp and slung it over his shoulder. "You can't scare me with death, Rianna. I've lived so long now even that would be a welcome distraction."

She punched his arm, but her fist merely bounced against the hardness of his muscle. "That's not funny. You may joke about it, but believe me when I tell you that

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you don't want this existence. It's the same thing every day. There's no end in sight. You're not living any longer. I'm not living any longer." Her voice broke and she looked away. "You really wouldn't want this."

He softened his stance and cupped her cheek. "Look. I appreciate the warning. I really do, but I'm going up that mountain and I'm going to find the book."

Rianna played for time. "I know where it is."

He froze. "What?"

"I know where the book is. It's not up the mountain. In fact, it's not anywhere near the mountain."

His eyes narrowed and she saw his body tense. "Then where is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Then how do I know it's not on the mountain, after all?"

She thrust her chin out at a defiant angle. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"Why not? It's not like you owe me anything and I sure as hell don't owe you anything. We're just two strangers."

His words struck her and she pulled away from him, turning her back. "Fine. Have it your way, Caleb. Go on this futile search. You'll never find the book, but let's just hope you make it back down the mountain before the spirits find you."

The leaves broke beneath his feet as he approached her. She held her breath, waiting for him to touch her, as she knew he intended. He settled his hand on her shoulder. "Why are you so sure the spirits are coming after me?"

"Because I heard them. I heard Ezra."

Caleb's face cleared. "And what did he say?"

"That the Fates want the book protected at every cost." She looked away from the ferocity of his gaze.

"There's something you're not telling me."

"I can't tell you everything."

He snatched hold of her arm and his grip went from gentle to savage. "Where is the book, Rianna?"

She tried to twist free, but he only held tighter. "As you said, I don't owe you anything. Go find it yourself if you're so sure you can." She could fade, leave him alone on his quest, but instincts kept her there.

The night settled around them while they stared at one another. Stars winked overhead and an owl hooted in the distance and still they looked into each other's eyes, never breaking contact.

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Caleb finally loosened his hold and brought his hand to her face. "Thank you for warning me."

"It wasn't just a warning. I want you to leave."

"That's not going to happen."

She smacked his shoulder. "Why won't you listen to me?"

"Because I have something more important to worry about than the feelings of a woman I barely know!" he shouted in return.

"Oooh! You are, without a doubt, the most obstinate, arrogant, asinine man I've ever met. I hope the spirits find you. In fact, I think I'll tell them where to look."

Caleb caught hold of her hand and yanked her close to him. "Tell me where to find the damned book."

"Go to hell."

His hand snaked around to the back of her neck. "I believe I'm about to do just that." His lips captured hers, bruising, unyielding.

Rianna gasped into his mouth and pushed against his chest. She managed to lift her lips from his. "I could leave," she warned.

"You could," he breathed.

"I'm serious. I could fade right now. You'd be left holding empty air."

Caleb's lips curled into a sexy smile that caused her heart to skip a beat. "Yeah, you say that, but I don't see you fading."

He had a point. She hooked her leg around behind his calf and latched onto him, pressing her crotch into his thigh.

He snagged a hand full of her hair and gave it a forceful tug. "What do you want, Rianna? Tell me what you want."

"I want you."

"That's not good enough." He forced her face upwards. She saw the glint in his eyes, but it was the hardness between his legs that captured her attention.

"What do you want me to say?"

He wedged one hand in between his thigh and palmed her cunt. "Tell me what you want me to do right now. Tonight."

As the air exploded into a wave of misty heat, she gave in. "Fuck me."

He curled his fingers against her crotch and Rianna ground her hips against the plundering. "Yeah, you like that, don't you?"

Her hands curled into his hair and she molded herself to him, shoving her full breasts against his chest, allowing him to feel the softness. She sucked at his neck, his

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shoulder, before ripping the shirt from his body. She flung the tattered material aside and began a savage assault upon his upper torso.

Caleb hitched her other leg around his waist and carried her toward the nearest tree. She felt the trunk scrape her spine and when he tore her blouse away, the bark left imprints against her skin. Her breasts spilled out into his palms and Caleb drew in a deep breath.

“No bra,” he whispered.

“I’ve always hated the things.”

“Thank God.” He tantalized first one nipple then the other, licking and suckling until Rianna felt wetness drench her panties. His hard fingertips pressed into the flesh just above the waistband of her jeans. “Get these damn things off,” he commanded.

Rianna didn’t argue as he stepped back. She peeled the denim off her legs and kicked the pants to one side. She stood before him in a little scrap of lace. Caleb fell to his knees in front of her and shoved her back against the tree. He grabbed hold of one leg and draped it over his shoulder. Rianna caught her breath and held it, almost scared to breathe. The panties came off with a simple flick of his wrist. She heard the thin string snap, but she was beyond caring.

He moved his hand over her muff, gently teasing the small triangle of chestnut hair. She moaned and her standing leg began to shake. “Easy,” he soothed. “I want to taste you.”

She knew her legs would collapse at any moment. “I don’t think...”

“Good.” The response brought a smile to her lips, but the touch of his tongue to her crease wiped the mirth away. He took his sweet time, investigating every inch of her pussy with his inquisitive tongue. He stroked the top, the sides and the lips and when just when Rianna was prepared to beg, he nudged open the soft petals and gently licked her clit.

She cried out and captured fistfuls of his hair. The strands were silky soft against her palms, nothing like the man.

“Sweet,” he murmured, dipping into the inner sanctum to draw out even more of her juices.

“Oh God.” Rianna slammed her spine against the tree.

He lifted his head. “What would you like me to do, Rianna?” He trailed one naughty finger up the inside of her thigh before slipping it into her body. “I need you to tell me what you want. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She couldn’t imagine he could, but she told him anyway. “Eat me. Make me come.”

Walking Through Fire

Caleb adjusted his knees on the bed of leaves and bent his head. "As you wish, my lady."

Though she'd already felt his tongue, this assault took her unawares.

He didn't just stroke her; he lavished her. His fingers didn't simply stretch the folds of her pussy, they fucked her, in and out, until Rianna bucked helplessly against the invasion.

She couldn't prevent the inarticulate cries escaping her lips and when her knee wobbled, Caleb instinctively braced his shoulder against it to keep her standing. Relentlessly, he tormented her, drawing her clit into his mouth while the roughness of his tongue made the torture complete.

She welcomed the orgasm, which wrenched her muscles into spasms and while her hips slammed her pussy against Caleb's face, he continued to lap at her creaminess. He held the backs of her thighs and increased the intensity and speed of his tongue.

She came again. And again. Until weak and helpless, she collapsed against him. He braced her with his body and rose to his full height. He cupped her face and kissed her deeply, hungrily and though Rianna had never tasted her own essence before, she welcomed his tongue.

The kiss segued into erotic foreplay and Rianna dropped her hands to find the damp bulge between his thighs. The explosion of her own orgasms had tested the limits of his own self-control and when Rianna freed him from his jeans, he gave a groan of pure relief.

"Hold on," he commanded before he wound her legs around his hips and thrust into her.

Rianna gave her own cry of relief, feeling gloriously alive. Deliciously real. She dug her nails into his shoulders as he slammed into her time and again, dragging her into another shattering climax.

He came on a long, low groan and dropped his forehead to hers. "Sweet God," he whispered. "Nothing has ever felt this right before."

Rianna kissed his cheeks, his nose, before pulling her head back to see his face. "We have to hurry."

He blinked at her, confusion swirling within the depths of his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"We have to find the book before Ezra and the others do." Rianna didn't know what made her give in unless it was knowing she couldn't force him to stay with her. What kind of life would he have anyway? He couldn't tie himself to a ghost for all eternity? This was her damnation to suffer and she would walk through this fire alone.

Walking Through Fire

Chapter Five

Caleb didn't know why Rianna chose to break the strict covenants of the Realm to help him find the book, but he wasn't about to stop her. He needed the answers. He needed to know why immortality was his, but most importantly, he needed to know if he could give it back.

Rianna stopped walking and snatched hold of Caleb's hand, her fingers digging into his wrist. "They're close."

He neither saw nor smelled anything. "How do you know?"

She didn't look at him. "I feel them."

"And they're angry." He didn't need her senses to know that. Even he felt the tangible fury in the air.

She sighed. "They know I'm helping you."

"So why don't they just move the book?"

She did look at him then and her eyes were filled with disbelief. "You mean you don't know?"

He shook his head slowly. "No. I don't know."

"The book can only be touched by clean hands."

"Do ghosts not have clean hands?"

Rianna made a rude noise and resumed walking. "Hands the Fates have wiped clean."

"And the Fates wouldn't wipe clean the hands of those protecting the sacred book?"

Rianna chewed her lower lip and Caleb knew then she'd never thought of that. "So maybe they can move the book." She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I'm not sure."

Caleb watched the sway of her hips as she walked ahead of him and he wondered what would happen once he made his discovery. Would finding the book remove Rianna from his life? How could he have allowed a ghost to penetrate the shell of his heart? She wasn't even alive, for God's sake. He shouldn't care about her. In fact, caring about her was an impossibility.

Walking Through Fire

He shoved his hands into his pockets and quickened his pace to catch up with her. "Where are we going, Rianna?"

"To my grandfather's old place."

"Is that where we'll find the book?"

Rianna gave him an almost pitying look. "No. That's where we'll find the means to allow you to enter the Realm."

Caleb scratched his chin. "I'm going to the Realm?"

"If you want to find the book, you are." She hesitated. "You're not scared, are you?"

Not that he would ever admit. Concerned would be his adjective of choice. "Of course not. Lead on."

"Do you want to tell me why you hate being immortal so much?"

"Because I've lived too long."

"Is there such a thing?"

"Yeah, there is."

"Couldn't tell it by me," she snorted.

"If you could be alive again, would you?"

She glared at him over her shoulder, but didn't slow her pace. "That's a stupid question. Of course, I would."

"If you could choose immortality?"

"Again, stupid question."

He caught hold of her arm and forced her to stop walking. "You don't know what this is like, Rianna, anymore than I know what death is like. But watching your family, everyone you love die, isn't something I'd recommend."

Her eyes softened and she reached up to touch his cheek. "I'm sorry. I don't know what it was like for you. I never should have said that."

"You couldn't have known." He looked away from the pity in her eyes. "And it doesn't matter. We all have our demons."

Rianna stood on tiptoe and brushed his lips with hers. "Maybe once you find what you're looking for in the book, you will also find peace."

He cupped her cheek. "I think I could find peace right here."

She gave him an impish smile. "You mean with a ghost?"

"For a ghost," his hands snagged her waist, "you feel extremely real to me."

She melted against his chest and he felt the hard outline of her peaked nipples. "So is there something you'd rather do besides walk?"

Walking Through Fire

He rocked her gently against the lower half of his body. “There are hundreds of things I’d like to do with you, but,” he pulled in a deep breath, “I want to find out who I am first.”

She raised her head and pressed her palm against his chest. “I already know who you are.”

“Oh, yeah? Then who am I?”

“The one man I thought I’d never meet.”

Ezra watched the couple on their journey while he formulated his plan. He wasn’t quite sure how to eliminate an immortal, but he was sure he’d find a way...the very instant Caleb got his hands on the book. Ezra didn’t doubt the Fates would allow him to touch it. He was their chosen one.

Ezra shivered at the reminder. He didn’t want to lose his exalted position within the Realm, but unless he met the demands of his superiors, that was exactly what would happen. His superiors wanted the book and they would stop at nothing to discover the secrets hidden within those hallowed pages.

Ezra gulped and glided higher into the sky, floating above Caleb and Rianna while they communed hand in hand. He’d always hated the girl. With her smart-ass attitude and rebellious nature, she outwitted him at every turn. Even her jaunt in the Netherworld hadn’t done much to curb her ways.

But soon. Ezra’s smile came slowly. Soon, things would change. As soon as the book was in his hands, he’d have more power than he’d ever imagined...and even the mighty Oscar would bow to him.

They settled inside a deserted log cabin for the night. Caleb built a fire to ward off the evening chill and while Rianna lay on the bearskin rug, drifting in and out of her corporeal form, he paced in the kitchen area.

Sleep eluded her and the pull of the spirit world was strong, stronger than ever before. She knew instantly her grandfather had something to do with the call. She sat up straighter and pushed her hair away from her face just as Oscar materialized in front of her.

“Gramps!” She got to her feet and hugged him. “What are you doing here?”

Bushy white eyebrows sagged low, revealing Oscar’s displeasure. “I’m afraid you and your new boyfriend are in a lot of trouble. We should all leave now.”

Caleb approached Oscar slowly, his steps deceptively soft. “I’m not going anywhere without some answers.”

Walking Through Fire

Oscar made an irritated sound. "The Spirit Council is on its way now. It seems that Ezra may have figured out how to alleviate your immortality problem, young Caleb."

Rianna clutched Gramps' arm. "He's found the book?"

"He's always known where the book is, my love. He just hasn't been allowed to touch it." Oscar pinned his gaze on Caleb's face. "That's why he needs you."

Caleb folded his arms across his chest. "Because he wants to know what's inside."

Oscar bobbed his white head. "Exactly. So the two of you need to stay hidden until I find out how to resolve this matter."

Caleb stoked the fire in a calm manner. "I'm not in the habit of hiding from my problems, Oscar, but thanks for the information."

Oscar leaned forward and thumped him on the shoulder. "You need to listen to me unless you want to die before you find out who you really are?"

Caleb tossed another heavy stick of wood onto the fire and straightened, turning to face Oscar. "Why do I need the book when you can tell me who I am?"

Rianna quickly intervened. "Caleb, if Gramps knew anything, he would have told you by now."

Caleb raised one eyebrow. "Would he now?"

Rianna looked at her grandfather. "Wouldn't you, Gramps?"

Oscar's eyes dropped and he cleared his throat. "Well, there are some things that I have no business revealing."

Before Rianna could respond, the air began to shimmer around them. Oscar gave a curse and snatched hold of Rianna's arm and the collar of Caleb's shirt.

Rianna reached for Caleb's hand as the mist swirled and their bodies disintegrated into fine vapors. She heard Caleb's muttered, "what the hell," then the atmosphere clogged with thick, black smoke.

Coughing and sputtering, Rianna landed on her rump, hitting the tiled floor with a startled "oomph." She immediately scanned the area for Caleb, but she was alone. And her ass hurt.

She climbed to her feet, clamped her hands on her hips and called out, "Gramps, where are you? And why am I not with you?"

Caleb opened his eyes to a new world. Everywhere he looked, he saw gossamer, silk and layers upon layers of lace drifting from a glass ceiling. He tipped his head back for a better look and beyond the glass, he saw infinity. Nothing except a vast endless portal of space.

Walking Through Fire

“Intimidating, isn’t it?” Oscar’s voice broke the silence and dragged Caleb’s attention back to the present.

“Where have you taken me?”

“One side of the Spirit Realm.”

Caleb raised an eyebrow. He’d always hated riddles. “And what’s the difference between this side and the other side?”

Oscar’s lips hidden well beneath the bushy moustache twitched. “Rianna is on the other side.”

“Care to tell me why you separated us?”

Oscar glowered at him. “Because she’s my granddaughter and I’d rather she didn’t get hurt.”

Caleb folded his arms and nodded his head slowly as if in complete understanding. “So what you’re saying is you couldn’t give a shit if I get hurt.”

More twitching. “That about sums it up, yes. Now, let’s go. The room is straight ahead.”

“What room?”

Oscar began walking. “The room holding the book, of course.”

Every muscle in Caleb’s insides began to twitch. Could he really be this close to finding out the secrets to his immortality? Was it possible the old man would really take him to his destiny? Caleb found himself holding his breath as he traipsed along behind Oscar.

“Step lively, young man,” Oscar growled over his shoulder.

Caleb couldn’t remember the last time he’d been called a young man, possibly because he was over two hundred years old. His own lips twitched. “I’ll do my best to keep up, Oscar.”

A massive steel door loomed ahead and just as Oscar reached the handle, a loud hissing sound rent the air. The old man didn’t break his concentration and he tugged with all his might. The door popped free of its hinges and a blast of smoke puffed out, making Caleb’s eyes water.

Oscar swept a hand toward the entrance. “What are you waiting for? Get in there.”

Caleb didn’t hesitate, but as he took two steps toward the opening, a loud screech gave him pause.

“Don’t stop now!” Oscar shouted. “I’ll handle things on this end.”

The door bumped against Caleb’s back and he found himself alone at the end of a vast corridor. His steps echoed across the polished tile as he moved forward. At the back

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wall, set beneath a lone window with etched glass, he saw what he'd come for. The book, tucked beneath rectangular glass, lay open, ripe for the reading.

The thumping against the door warred with the thumping of his head and just as he reached the glass, he realized his hands were shaking. He wiped his palms down the legs of his jeans and settled his hands on either side of the protective shield.

"Caleb, don't!" Rianna's yell had him spinning around. As she materialized behind him, he dropped his hands.

"Rianna, what are you doing here? I thought your grandfather left you on the other side of the Realm or something like that."

Rianna rushed forward, taking hold of his shirt to pull him away from the podium, which held the Book of Secrets. "You can't touch the book."

"We already had this discussion."

"You don't know if you're the Chosen One and if you're not, you will die if you touch the book."

His eyebrow lifted. "If you're trying to scare me, you need to pick a better way." He slid his palm alongside her face. "If I touch the book and live, I find out why I'm still living. If I touch the book and die, I get to spend eternity with you. I'm looking for the downside."

Rianna rested her forehead against his chest while her hands fisted against his arms. "You might think you want to die, but you don't." She lifted her head and the fine sheen of tears in her eyes caused a knot to form in the center of his stomach. "Trust me on this one, Caleb."

His knuckles caressed her soft skin. "Why does my dying bother you so much? You barely know me."

She captured his hand and pressed it over her left breast where her heart used to beat. "I know you here. I felt like I've waited all my life to find you. And now," her lower lip wobbled, "I don't want to lose you."

Her words wrapped around his heart and Caleb felt the emotion clogging the back of his throat. He wouldn't deny that he'd thought the same thing, but any type of relationship between an immortal and a ghost was doomed to failure. He kept his negative thoughts to himself and kissed the tip of her nose. "As much as I appreciate your attempts to help, I have to do this."

Rianna clutched his hand. "Don't expect me to leave you now."

He smiled down into her upturned face. "I never asked you to leave to begin with." He gave her a wink and started forward again.

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He lifted the glass without incident and as the pages began to glow, his heart slammed against his ribcage, his blood roaring in his ears. This was it. The moment he'd waited for. He's spent the last half of the century looking for this book and now, the time had arrived.

He pulled his hand free of Rianna's grip and reached for the black bound book. The gilded pages beckoned him and he couldn't resist gliding his palm over the neatly typed words. Heat warmed his skin, but he felt no other effects. He shot Rianna a reassuring smile and lifted the book into his arms.

A deafening noise rocked the corridor and the force of the explosion sent both Rianna and Caleb reeling. Instinctively, Caleb threw the book to one side and covered Rianna with his body.

And when the smoke cleared, Ezra held the book with a smile on his face and a dark, evil glow in his eyes.

Rianna rushed forward, but the ghost held up one hand and she froze in her tracks. Stunned, she shot a glance toward Caleb before directing her attention back toward Ezra. "Caleb wasn't going to hurt the book."

Ezra chuckled though it held no mirth. "Of that, I am aware, my sweet. In fact, I cannot thank him enough for his participation." He met Caleb's gaze with a broad smile. "The Fates have decreed that only one with clean hands may touch the book. I see they have bestowed favor upon you." He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "But soon, it will be I who will be bestowing favor and..." his eyes darkened. "I can't imagine I'll be feeling any such favor toward you, Rianna."

The book clasped to his chest, he began to pace the corridor in a small circle. "You can't know how long I've waited for this book. It holds the secrets of life, the very nature of our existence and while some might be content to remain as ghosts in this ethereal existence, I can assure you, I am not one of them."

"The Fates will not allow you to keep the book," Rianna pointed out in a much calmer voice than what she felt.

Ezra waved a hand in dismissal. "They won't have a choice. With the book, I will be as powerful as they are."

Caleb took a step forward and Rianna reached out to try to prevent him, but he shook her hand away. "You cannot control the Fates, Ezra. You and I both know that."

At Caleb's tone of voice, Rianna's eyes widened. He sounded distinctly different, more powerful, almost frightening and one look at his face told her the man she thought she knew was changing.

Walking Through Fire

Caleb shot one hand into the air and Ezra's feet lifted off the ground. "Return the book and I'll think about allowing you to remain in the Spirit Realm. Defy me and Oblivion will be your new home."

Rianna hurried forward, reaching out one hand to touch the sleeve of Caleb's shirt. Her fingertips tingled and she quickly tucked her hand back to her side. She didn't know what the hell was going on and she wasn't quite sure Caleb knew, either. For a brief moment, she thought she saw a strange look in his eyes, confusion, maybe.

"Caleb," she spoke his name softly so as not to alarm him.

"Silence," Caleb barked.

Silence? Rianna thumped his arm. "Listen to me."

He turned his face toward her slightly and then Rianna saw it. Definitely not confusion. More like fury swirling in those depths. She gulped, but didn't back down. "So what do you think you're going to do to him and most importantly, how do you think you're going to do it?"

"You will be silent."

Rianna's brows disappeared into her hair. "Who are you?"

Ezra began to laugh, tossing his head back so that his Adam's apple bobbed noticeably. When his humor ended, he fixed his eyes on Caleb's face. "I knew there was more to you than met the eye."

Caleb brought Ezra back to the ground and secured a hand around the ghosts corporeal neck. "Release the book."

"Not without a fight," Ezra gagged.

"As you wish." As easily as a child would toss a teddy bear, Caleb sent Ezra flying through the air. Ezra bumped against the far wall and with a grunt, slid down the brick interior, his eyes glazed.

Caleb advanced, his steps stealthy and controlled. He picked Ezra up with one hand and held him against the wall. "You will return the book to me or I will snuff out your very existence."

Rianna thought that sounded like a bit much. She came forward, scooting across the floor to risk Caleb's wrath again. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place. She'd know the Fates to play some cruel tricks before but inhabiting her boyfriend, if she could call Caleb that, irked her. "Okay, ladies, it's time to let him go."

Caleb looked over his shoulder. "Stay back."

Rianna kept walking. "Caleb won't let you hit me." She hoped.

"You take your life into your own hands," the guttural voice intoned.

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Rianna threw her hands up into the air. “What life? Now, put Ezra down, please. He’ll give the book back and we can all lead happy, healthy lives...or afterlives, rather.” She couldn’t believe she was playing peacemaker. Her grandfather would laugh. And speaking of Gramps...”Ezra, where’s Gramps?”

Ezra thumbed over his shoulder. “Still out there.”

“You blew the door open. Why didn’t he come in?”

The leader of the council glared at her. “I don’t know. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m a little busy.”

Rianna raced out into the exterior room, hoping she wasn’t taking a chance by leaving Caleb’s shell alone with Ezra. But she had to find Gramps. “Gramps! Gramps, where are you?”

She followed the sounds of coughing and sputtering and found her grandfather slumped against a door which was hanging by its hinges. She knelt down beside him. “Are you all right?”

Dust littered his beard and eyebrows and his clothes were covered in soot. Gramps brushed one hand down the front of his shirt and coughed again. “Do I look all right?” Using Rianna as a prop, he pushed himself to his feet. “So what’s going on in there?”

“The Fates have taken over Caleb’s body.”

Gramps arched one eyebrow. “Interesting.” He ambled down the hallway with her. “And Ezra?”

“They’re threatening to send him to Oblivion now.”

Gramps chuckled. “Now that would be a crying shame.” They crossed the threshold into the keep where the Book of Secrets was held. Gramps assessed the situation with a raspy chuckle.

“Ezra, I always thought this was what you were after.” He tipped his head toward Caleb. “Afternoon, Ladies.”

Before Caleb could respond, a long keening wail tore the air into shreds and all occupants of the room covered their ears. Caleb fell to his knees and Rianna scrambled to reach his side.

“Are you okay?” She shouted over the noise.

“Define okay,” he returned, his hand clutching hers.

“Are they gone?”

“I think so and they were the most irritating women I’ve ever had the misfortune to meet. Not one of them could make a decision without first conferring.” Caleb pushed himself to his feet, glared at Ezra and stomped forward. With a hearty yank, he freed the

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Book of Secrets and jabbed a finger in Ezra's chest. "I don't know what the Fates intend to do to you, but I hope they find you a suitable vessel to spend the next fifteen, twenty years in."

Gramps chuckled. "Oh, come now, Caleb. It couldn't have been that long."

Caleb returned the book to its pedestal. "It certainly felt like it." He placed one palm atop the opened pages and grew still.

"Still want to know its secrets, boy?" Oscar said as he came to stand behind Caleb.

Rianna turned her back on Ezra and made her way to Caleb's side he stood frozen in place. "You're this close to finding out," she pointed out.

Caleb drew in a deep breath and began to turn the pages.

"How do you know where to look?" Rianna peered over his shoulder.

"I'm not sure. Instincts, maybe?" He flashed her a grin and Rianna gripped his hand. "I'm close. Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine. Eighty-one." He backtracked. "Seventy-nine. A page is missing." He stared down at the book. "The page I need."

Oscar clamped one hand on his shoulder. "Some secrets are best kept, boy."

Caleb didn't look up. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

"I knew the Fates had called you to a higher purpose. I just wasn't sure what that purpose was."

Caleb stiffened and turned around. "Great. Everyone gets to know about my life, my purpose except for me." He released Rianna's hand and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Rianna called after him.

"Home."

Caleb didn't know how he managed to end up back on the forest floor. Maybe Oscar had taken pity on him, but either way, the pine needles crunched beneath his booted feet as he walked the trail. He wasn't even sure if he was headed in the right direction, but walking felt good long about now. He needed to do something to burn off his energy, his anger.

"So where exactly are you going now?" came the soft voice behind him.

He didn't respond. He couldn't turn around. He didn't want to see the dark-haired beauty behind him. She wanted him to stay and he'd figured out that his wants didn't matter. His jaw clenched as he picked up the pace.

Rianna jogged to catch up with him. "Aren't you going to talk to me?"

"Did you know?"

"About the missing page from the book? Of course not. I would have told you."

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Caleb gritted his teeth. "I wonder."

Rianna said something below her breath that sounded distinctly like "fuck you," but Caleb didn't ask.

"Why don't you go back to the realm, Rianna? I'm sure everything's in an uproar."

"You're wrong?"

Curiosity had him flashing her a glance. "What do you mean?"

"Ezra's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yep. As in caput. He disappeared."

Caleb winced. "Probably the Fates. They seemed a nasty lot."

Rianna laughed. "Not ordinarily, but they can play with other people's lives more than I care for."

"They took the page."

She sighed. "Probably." She caught hold of his sleeve to compel him to stop. "Do you really have to go home now?"

He looked down at the small hand holding his shirt. "What else am I supposed to do, Rianna? I have a life to return to...an extremely long life."

She rocked back on her heels, imploring him with big eyes. "You could stay here."

"And do what exactly? Live in the woods while I wait for you to show up every so often?" He held up one hand. "Don't get me wrong. The sex is great, but I'm not exactly Davy Crocket."

"Gramps has been elected the leader of the Spirit Council."

Caleb blinked at the sudden change of topic. "Good for him, but what does that have to do with the conversation we were having."

"You could come to the realm with me."

"The last time I checked, I'm not dead."

"You don't have to be if the council makes an exception."

He sensed where she was going and he headed her off. "Rianna, I can't stay here."

"Why not?"

He cupped her cheek. "Because there's nothing for me here." His hand dropped to his side and he began to walk again. He wasn't surprised that she let him walk away this time.

Walking Through Fire

Back to his normal routine, in what was considered normal society, Caleb closed the textbook and sat down behind his desk. "That'll be all for today, everyone. Make sure you study Chapter Twelve for the test Monday morning." He heard the groans and shuffling feet as the freshmen college students filed out the door.

The end of another long week. Caleb massaged his temples before shoving his lesson plans aside. He couldn't concentrate on another piece of history...unless it was the one he left behind in Romania.

Pushing himself to his feet, he walked to the window, his shoulders slumped. He watched the bustle of students hurrying to their cars, eager to get home to begin their weekend and he wondered what in the hell he was doing.

In the past three weeks since he'd returned to New York, he'd spent exactly one night not thinking about Rianna and that was only because he'd gotten so drunk he couldn't remember his own name. He didn't know why he kept thinking about her. They had absolutely nothing in common besides the great sex. But then, hadn't someone once said that opposites attracted?

The door behind him opened and he frowned. "I'm sorry. Now's not a good time."

"Then I guess I should come back later."

That voice! He spun around and stared. Rianna stared back. He took two steps toward her. She took three to him. "What are you doing there?" Was that really his voice that sounded like a rusty hook?

She nodded slowly and ran her hands down the front of the plain white dress. He remembered it well. "I got a special dispensation from the council."

He stuck his hands in his pockets, knowing instinctively, if he didn't, he'd grab her. He needed to hear what she had to say. "Why?" Yep, that really was his voice.

"If I have to explain that then maybe I shouldn't have come."

Her voice washed over him like silk and he did grab her then, dragging her into his arms to bury his face in that wealth of dark hair. He loved her scent, her style, everything about her. He didn't question his emotions. He just clung to her.

"I can't believe you're here," he whispered.

"You didn't really expect me to let you walk away for good, did you?" Her voice carried a note of teasing as well as a slight trace of apprehension.

He pulled back and cupped her face, his thumb caressing the corners of her mouth. "Tell me why you came. I need to hear it."

"There's nothing for me in Romania."

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His heart leapt at the words. “Do you think there will be something for you in New York?”

“There already is.”

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Author Bio

Rachel is a published author in contemporary, fantasy, and paranormal romance with small vibrant presses. She works full time as a paralegal and also an editor for Vintage Romance.

See other works by this talented author at

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